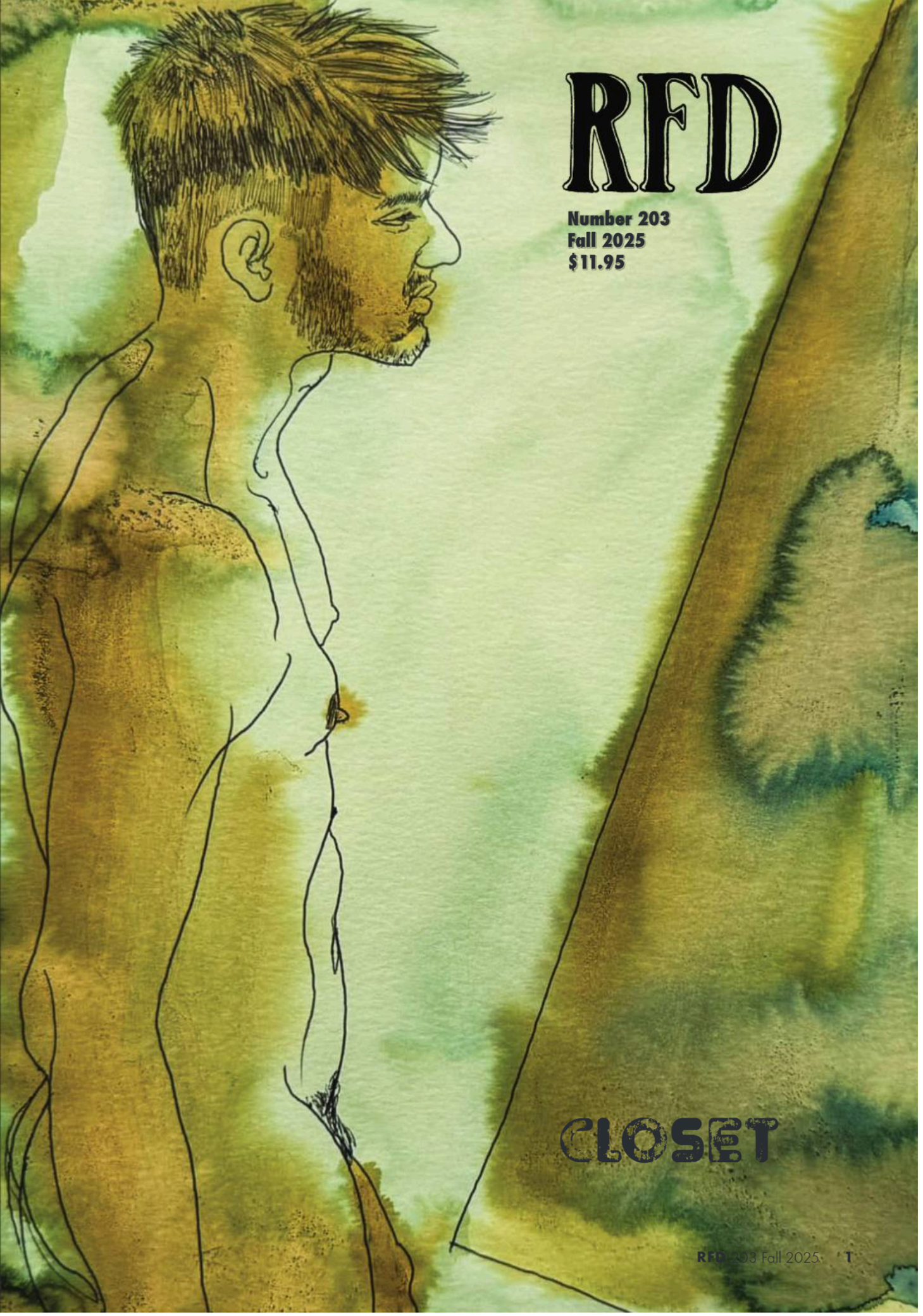

RFD

Number 203
Fall 2025
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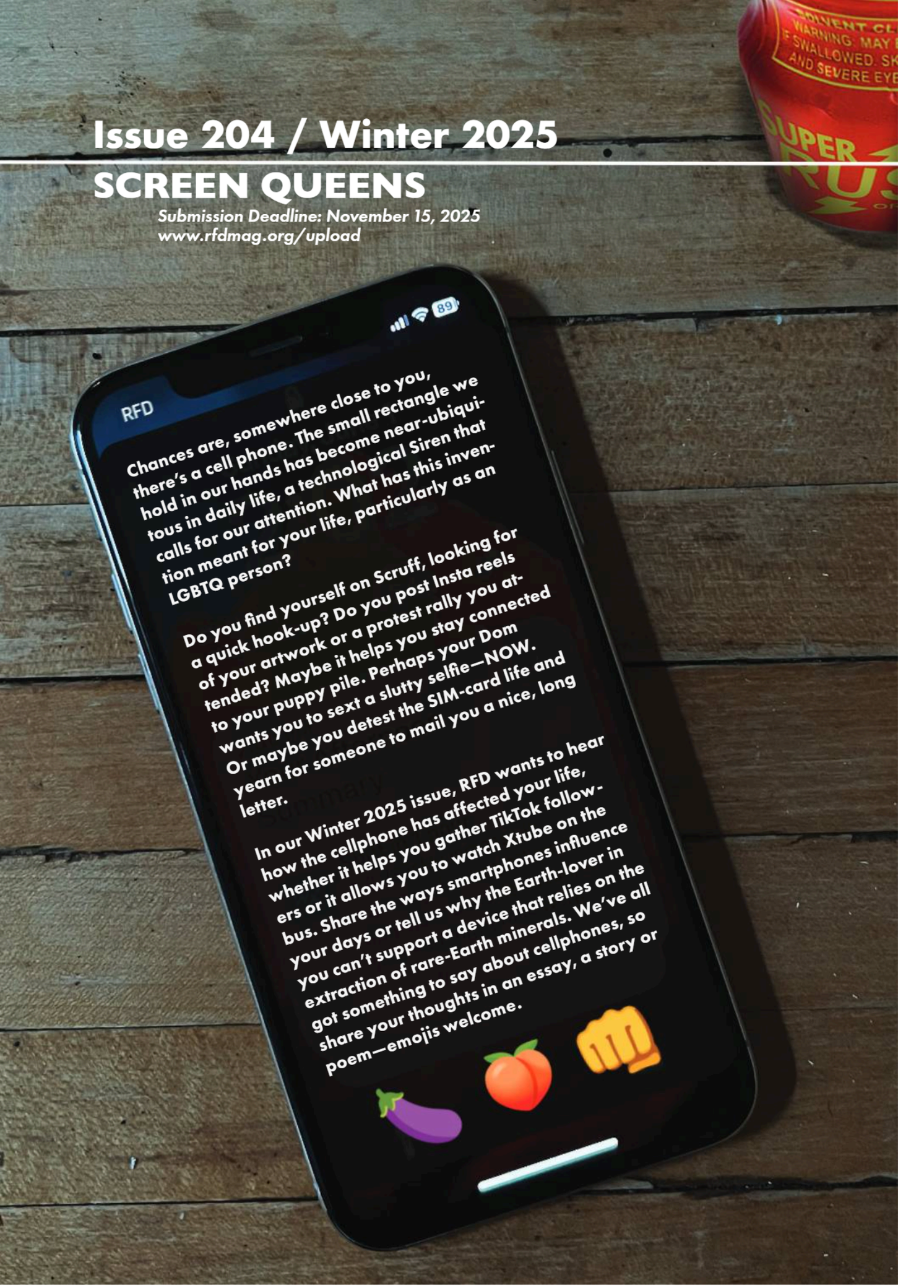
CLOSET

Issue 204 / Winter 2025

SCREEN QUEENS

Submission Deadline: November 15, 2025
www.rfdmag.org/upload


RFD
Chances are, somewhere close to you, there's a cell phone. The small rectangle we hold in our hands has become near-ubiquitous in daily life, a technological Siren that calls for our attention. What has this invention meant for your life, particularly as an LGBTQ person?
Do you find yourself on Scruff, looking for a quick hook-up? Do you post Insta reels of your artwork or a protest rally you attended? Maybe it helps you stay connected to your puppy pile. Perhaps your Dom wants you to sext a slutty selfie—NOW. Or maybe you detest the SIM-card life and yearn for someone to mail you a nice, long letter.
In our Winter 2025 issue, RFD wants to hear how the cellphone has affected your life, whether it helps you gather TikTok followers or it allows you to watch Xtube on the bus. Share the ways smartphones influence your days or tell us why the Earth-lover in you can't support a device that relies on the extraction of rare-Earth minerals. We've all got something to say about cellphones, so share your thoughts in an essay, a story or poem—emojis welcome.

Redecorating Fuscous Recesses

Vol 52 No 1 #203 Fall 2025

Between the Lines

In this issue we asked people to explore how the concept of "The Closet" has changed, how it's fit into your personal narrative and sharing how to make room in that space for safety, for time and for empowering ourselves to reshape ourselves as we explore ourselves.

It's been a hard summer for many of us and the narratives shared explore ways where the Closet has been a respite, a place to rebound and not always be a place of hiding or oppression.

It's a tense subject but it carries many lessons, stories and places of strength.

We also have some great poetry from a variety of voices – we know they'll inspire you to declutter your closets looking for a sweet outfit for the day.

We welcome Franklin Abbott's new poetry collection, My Ordinary Life, and we include a brief interview and some of Franklin's poems.

As we turn toward the autumn—we welcome our readers to rekindle closeness, enjoy the cooler days, and please consider sharing with us your ideas for future issues and always our magazine exists as a venue to document our stories together so do contribute your words, images and dreams with us in the next issues.

We hope you enjoy the issue.

From a foggy Vermont morning

—The RFD Collective

Submission Deadlines

Winter–November 15, 2025
Spring–February 15, 2026

See inside covers for themes and specifics.

For online issues, advertising, subscriptions, back orders and other information visit **www.rfdmag.org.**

RFD is a reader-written journal for gay people which focuses on country living and encourages alternative lifestyles. We foster community building and networking, explore the diverse expressions of our sexuality, care for the environment, Radical Faerie consciousness, and nature-centered spirituality, and share experiences of our lives. *RFD* is produced by volunteers. We welcome your participation. The business and general production are coordinated by a collective. Features and entire issues are prepared by different groups in various places. *RFD* (ISSN# 0149-709X) is published quarterly for $25 a year by *RFD* Press, PMB 329, 351 Pleasant St., Ste B, Northampton, MA 01060-3998. Postmaster: Send address changes to *RFD* Press, PMB 329, 351 Pleasant St., Ste B, Northampton, MA 01060-3998. Non-profit tax exempt #62-1723644, a function of *RFD* Press, Inc., with office of registration at 231 Ten Penny Rd., Woodbury, TN 37190. *RFD* Cover Price: $11.95. A regular subscription is the least expensive way to receive *RFD* four times a year. First class mailed issues will be forwarded. Others will not. Send address changes to submissions@rfdmag.org or to our Northampton, MA address. Copyright © *RFD* Press, Inc. The records required by Title 18 U.S.D. Section 2257 and associated with respect to this magazine (and all graphic material associated therewith on which this label appears) are kept by the custodian of records at the following location: *RFD* Press, 85 N Main St, Ste 200, White River Junction, VT 05001.

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Donald Patten.....*37, Inside Back Cover*
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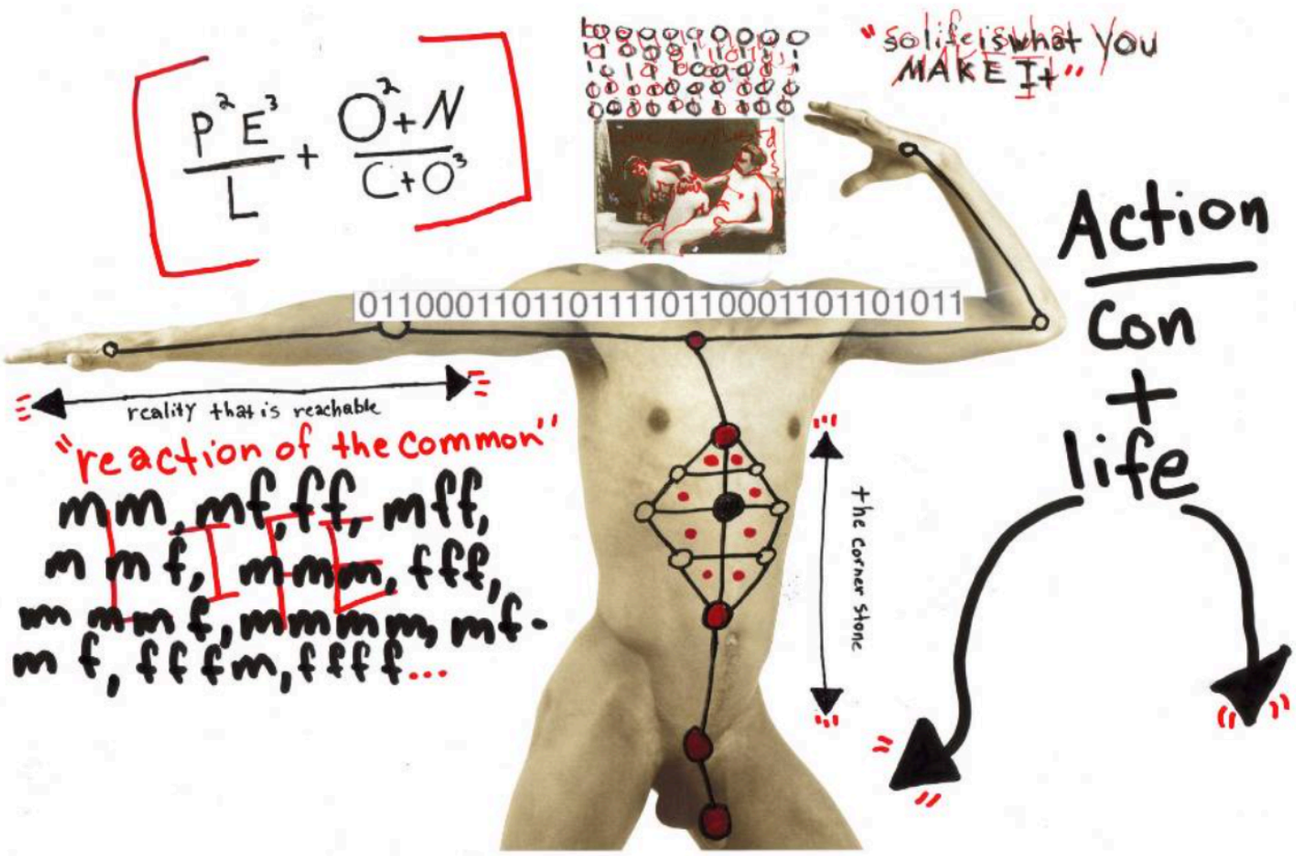

Untitled by Artboydancing.

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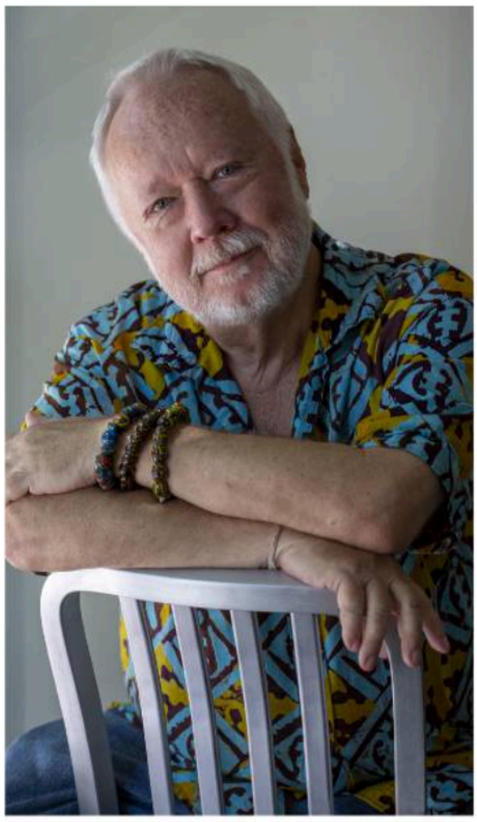
Franklin Abbott—Living in the Ordinary

by Bambi

Poet Franklin Abbott has written a new book as an imprint of RFD Press. We're thrilled to hear from longtime emotional support guru to the current RFD collective, former poetry editor at RFD about his latest work.

RFD: Franklin, you've written several collections of poetry and books focusing on men's lives at the height of the "Men's Movement". What brought you to this new collection of poems and memoir?

Franklin: I write poetry to better understand myself and to connect with others more deeply. Much of this collection was written during the COVID lockdowns and helped me understand my losses and ironically some positive things about my much slowed down life.



RFD: Your work is often deeply personal yet seeking to speak to universals. What commonalities should we be seeking out in your work especially given the times we're in facing federal and global regression and repression facing common people?

Franklin: Two things come to mind. One is the importance of grief and grieving. I feel that a big piece of what went wrong with the last election was a lack of empathy. Most people did not care enough to vote or were too tired, too stressed or too cynical valuing the price of eggs over such vital issues as women's reproductive rights. The other is how important kindness is. When in doubt be kind to others and especially to yourself.

RFD: You work focuses on loss, isolation and a shifting world. Can you share a few poems that you most want to share with RFD readers?

Franklin: Yes. [see facing page]

RFD: As RFD celebrates growing into our fifty-first year, can you give some wisdom to our readers old and young about facing new times with hope?

Franklin: We have seen worse. Much worse. Before Stonewall most LGBTQ people lived in terrible isolation and were subjected to horrible prejudice from church, state and family. It was difficult to find happiness especially in relationship to other LGBTQ people. And then there were the horrible years of the AIDS epidemic before a viable treatment existed. Fear was visceral and sex was frightening. We are strong because of those experiences and we have lived to see things change radically. I think we have to take care of ourselves and each other and when we can make what the late John Lewis called "good trouble." As LGBTQ people we are agents of change and agents of healing. Let us remember this with a passion.

RFD: Franklin thanks for your time and sharing your work with RFD these many years. Anything relating to our current theme "The Closet" which resonates with you to share? How do feel the Closet as a concept has changed?

Franklin: I think safe space is very important. I lock my doors at night. I need and value solitude. I also have the power and the privilege to open my doors and invite in friends and lovers. In a sense we all live in closets. Keep yours decorated to your taste and safe but also with doors and windows that can open to the world.

Photographs courtesy Franklin Abbott.

Three Poems by Franklin Abbott

Fog

the crest of a hill
birds in shadow
flying through
everything disappearing

I can only see myself
if I wipe the steam
from the mirror
and for those seconds
the steam doesn't rise
I can see my eyes
seeing me

Zikr

my dream life is a labyrinth
I think Carl Jung would agree
and if I had been writing down my dreams
all poems are dreams, dreams for fifty years
you might think I would have met my Minotaur
or found my damn way out

neither has been the case
I do not know where or what I will lose tonight
last night I couldn't read the number on my dorm
key
which took me hither and thither
through cafes and bookstores
and finally I distracted a kindly matron
who turned the fob over in my hand
it all made sense
and when I found my room
I woke up

having and extensive imagination
augmented by lots of novels and movies
I will come up with something else tonight
it could be a forest or a parking lot
or winding city streets
and I know the Minotaur is me
and he will no more catch me
than I will confront him
because then, game over
we will both die
in each other's arms

Creme Brulee

I lost my creme brule virginity in Paris
in a little restaurant in the Marais
where ruby slippers decorated our alcove
I don't remember the entree
but we drank good wine
we six me and Neil and Raven
Ilene and Linda and Kareem

Kareem was from Morrocco
Neil had hooked up with him
outside the the gay bar Le Quetzal
when it closed for the night
I didn't know he was a hustler

this got us thrown out of our cozy hotel
and we found another just a block away
none of us spoke French except Kareem
who got us into the fast track to the Louvre
and into this jewel box where after much wine
creme brulee
creme brulee
came to our table
and Kareem showed us how
to crack the glaze with a fork
and we oohed and aahed
and I have never forgotten

tonight
with old friends Nancy and Pauline
at Babette's Cafe
after entrees and wine
we had creme brulee
my first since Covid lockdown
I cracked the glaze
and ate the custard
and oohed and aahed
in homage to Kareem

Changing Closets

by Steve Milliken

I've lived in my huge three-bedroom apartment for forty-six years. If anyone asks, I moved in when I was two. And I'll lie under oath.

One of the few financial rewards of staying put—besides the leisure and pleasure of retirement—is rent control. Because I moved in decades ago, I now pay a third of what the newer, less fortunate (and considerably hotter) tenants in my upgraded building shell out. Santa Monica's vacancy decontrol law is the ultimate invisibility cloak for aging tightwads like me. But while being older may have its benefits, looking older in the gay men's community is a gay-mergency.

As I get older, I redesign the paradigm of time. Since guys my age can look moderately disturbing, I've shaved a decade off most of my online profiles. Thanks to surgical enhancements, the kind of bone structure Madeline Kahn praises in *Paper Moon*, and a genetic predisposition for Boy Next Door Syndrome, I can skip over a decade like it never happened. I've also mastered the art of the selfie. With the right angle, lighting, and a strategic squint, I can still appear rather fetching—despite my fleeting health and vigor. I used to be honest about my age and closeted about being gay. Now the two have reversed. I've traded one closet for another.

I haven't had a roommate in twenty years—and the number of visitors, both platonic and otherwise, has dramatically declined as well. It's unfortunate, considering I missed out on a lot of carnal knowledge thanks to internalized homophobia, debilitating shame, fear of rejection, and fear of HIV. Still, I've gained a little wisdom along the way. Internalized homophobia never fully goes away, but keep chipping at it. It blocks your authentic self—and you deserve to have some fun. Even if there's still that diminutive dollop of deep-rooted disgust lurking beneath the surface, being real is overrated later in life, especially when your immediate focus is a physical foray down the Hershey Highway.

Finally, I can evade the shame that drains me—and convert it into excitement. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. It's a shame to avoid shame, since that's what makes sex so deliciously dirty. I was raised to believe gay sex was a naughty abomination. And now? That's what makes it so exhilarating—and nasty. Shame: use it or lose it.

And when does anyone fully overcome the fear of rejection? Never. So let it go and try to be more Zen. Rejection lingers—but hopefully in smaller doses, especially if you don't summon it yourself.

Recently I changed my screen name to *KenDoll-Dad* to boost my online appeal. A cheeky millennial messaged me to say I looked more like *Grand-dad Ken*. I thought the name was provocative—until I realized I'd set myself up. It's hard enough trying to be politically correct. Now, thanks to my own branding, I also have to worry about being anatomically correct. Then he followed up: "Nice tits and ass, daddy. Are you a big squirter?" "Son, please don't get me started on the side effects of my prostate meds…."

Ironically, my decades-long fear of HIV has become the easiest psychological roadblock to overcome. I've always feared sex—especially bottoming—because of HIV. But these days, AIDS is no longer a death sentence, and the prescription drug PrEP has practically halted transmission altogether. PrEP is all the rage now, and the Scruff and Grindr guys wear it like a badge of honor. Sure, it has side effects—but at this point, I've only got a few good years left on this mortal coil, so why sweat the small stuff? I just added this to my profile: "Pill-popping prude takes PrEP and parties profusely. *Cum* see about me."

Somehow, I need to encourage more gainful guests to come over—something a bit more elevated than the tri-monthly tricks I currently attract through online connections. First impressions are still key… assuming they don't flee. Though frankly, sometimes I wish they would. Case in point: a tricky millennial arrived recently, luggage in tow, and asked me what I wanted him to wear. I thought the whole point of sex was to wear nothing. Silly me. I deferred to his better judgment. He went into the bathroom, suitcase in hand, and when he reemerged, it was more alarming than alluring. He was wearing a bedazzled, black, threadbare onesie riddled with runs and holes in the sheer distressed fabric. If not for the strategically placed cutouts, I might have considered making a senior citizen's arrest.

To reinforce my aforementioned deceit, I've reluctantly adhered to the mandates of diet and

"Closeted Fashionista" by Richard Vyse.

exercise. In addition to maintaining my decades of sobriety from drugs and alcohol, I recently kicked my addiction to nicotine lozenges—because over the years, I'd become a chain sucker. On my circuitous journey toward better health, I also became a vegetarian, though not a strict one. Occasionally, I'd eat chicken, fish… ass. I'm kidding, I kid. I didn't eat chicken.

These days, gentleman callers don't scrutinize my hand-me-down décor for gay hints—which, a few decades ago, would've sent me spiraling. A hunky hookup couldn't care less about furnishings that suggest I'm gay—but he *can* clock technological "tells" that reveal I'm older than I claim.

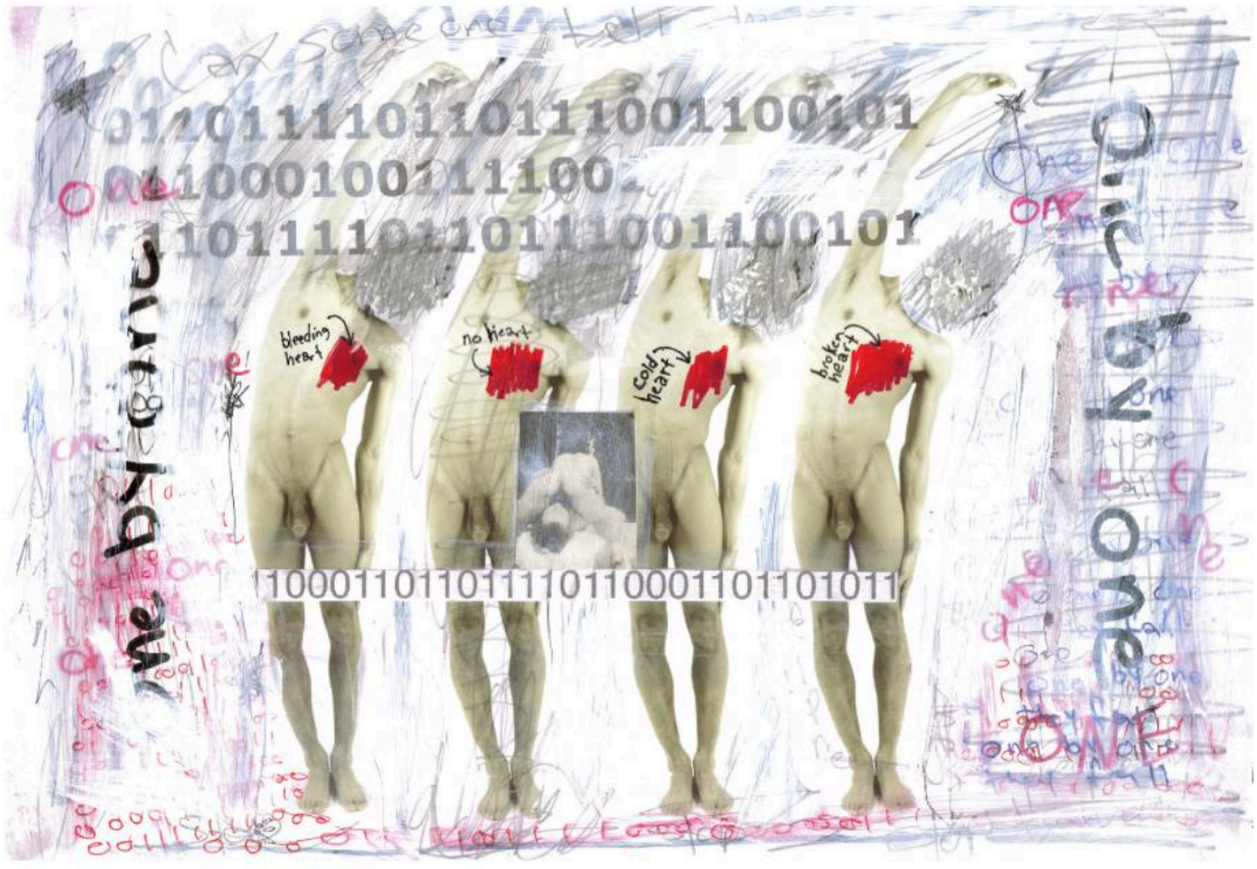
The towering carousel of porn DVDs beside my smart TV might suggest a baby boomer not quite as smart as his TV. And the stack of external hard drives full of hard-core action? Possibly the digital footprint of a sexual compulsive past his prime who doesn't seem to stream.

My tarnished, enduring bookcase holds countless classics about coming out. They may be old—like me—but they're flanked by more modern, equally pragmatic titles that help belie my age, such as *The Ass Book: Staying on Top of Your Bottom* and *How to Bottom Without Pain, or Stains*. Literate self-improvement should be instructive, transformative, and lasting—like my bookshelf of masterworks. And me.

My 1980 waterbed is another clear sign of bygone times. While its nautical novelty has retro charm—and most guys dive right in—some blokes blame the wavy motion for disrupting their fleshy flow and function. If they get seasick, they can be cast adrift. Not all maritime voyages fare well…

Nowadays, surging self-acceptance keeps me buoyant—despite the fearful choices that came before. Still, I have to admit: it feels strange to be my age and only now coming into my gay self. I feel like I just learned how to be a pubescent adolescent… even though I'm evidently old enough to be someone's *Grand-dad Ken*. (Accessories sold separately. Anatomical correctness not included.)

Unlike the Rolling Stones in 1964, time isn't always on my side. But I can embrace its advantages—and make them louder than its assault. I may lie about my age, but writing about my evolving worldview has never been sharper. Who knows—maybe one day soon, I'll come out of the closet again. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the Roman philosopher who died in 65 AD by way of a "stoic and calm suicide," wrote: *"Time discovers truth."* So, dear reader… I'm sixty-something. But please—keep it on the downlow.



Untitled by Artboydancing.

Jaime Rodriguez—Poems

Ojos de mar
(Original—Spanish)

Te veo
con una revista porno en el kiosco,
escondido,
ojos de mar.

Culo gordo pa' agarrar,
pelo güero sucio jalándome,
caliente, sofocado.

Yo, moreno macizo,
huevos pesados pa' reventar,
bien cargados.

Nos fuimos al depa—
puro suelo
y un sofá verde—
pa'l desmadre total.

Me rozas la verga con la tuya,
linda, peluda,
contra mi prieta resbalosa.

Te veo lamiendo el aire,
tragándote mi sudor
chacal y salado.

Te me echas encima, cabrón,
enterrándome
como si fuera tuyo.

Siento tus ganas
de tragarte mi prieta—
silbas bajito en mi oído.

Qué pedo, güey,
si nos cachan así, clavados,
puro vicio y prendidos.

Tus ojos de agua me queman,
mi nombre temblando
entre mis piernas
y más.

Leche a punto de tronar,
me froté bien perro
en la alfombra.

Iskra
(Translation—English)

Ojos de mar—tidal blue, flecked in gold / flooding
through me
Rinsing out what I meant to keep

That Slavic pull lays siege to me—piedra de molino /
ancient weight
turning slow beneath the sun / sweat darkening
the lines on my back

I let you take me
Each step pulling us closer than we'd ever dared
your shoulders braced /
locking the force between us

Bare floor / green couch caved / waiting
A room banked / silent / knotted in my ribs

Tasting the air / a breath breaking between us
You took the salt I carried
from furrows and maguey / closed in

Breath at my ear—frayed / almost asking
My hands knowing
how to keep us here

Flame into skin /
The burn holding me still /

Your brand
driven deep
into my bones

Last grip gone / I drove into the carpet
Fibers resisting / coming apart / what
was kept—loosed

It could've been quiet after rain
But you ground me until everything gave way

morning rye and mezcal in the breath we had left
spilled

Ya es hora del café con leche—
pero antes,
en 4 otra vez.

Subidón
(Original—Spanish)

Otoño chido junto al lago,
tu pinche tufo trigueño fresco…
me vuelve loco, cabrón.

Qué pedo, güey…
prieto, tieso y encapuchado.
Te necesito, mi fix—
pero nomás me quemas.

Ansia chingada,
tronco güero babeando…
chorros de mis chavos pa' ti.

Tirado en tierra,
piernas abiertas,
cereza expuesta…
rómpela como quieras.

Fieras pachecas en la noche fría…
aurora bombeando el aire,
tus manos arrasando mi piel.

Mis gemidos, neta, bien morbosos…
tu aliento me tizna
el vello corrido.

Mareado, ahogado, jadeando…
como si fueras mi perro vicio,
tú me jodiste, carnal.

Sabe a mí, tu bro polaquero…
mi sangre y sudor prenden machín,
cada pique me pega más.

Bañando mis huevos,
pesados, listos pa'l reviento…
olor de saliva prendiéndose a mi piel.

Tragas mi chuleta,
cabeza suave, dura…
cada centímetro te sumerge más.

Ash
(Translation - English)

Autumn / by the iron-cold lake's edge
my ashen musk / narcotic, unyielding
sends you reeling

Shadowed / taut / cloaked in sheath—
you're my fix
burning through every vein

Jonesing craving—
my pale frame gleaming
spent silver spilling reckless
for you

Sprawled on cold earth—
thighs splayed / split as torn fruit
break me
as you will

Mosquitos rabid / chasing my blood's high—
aurora beating the air
like smoke trapped in my lungs,
your hands
ravage my skin

Moans / jagged / broken—
your breath singes
the dark line trailing me

Dizzy / drowned / gasping
as if you were
my feral vice
you unmade me

Your taste—
my Slavic spark / under my skin—
a border crossing my veins,
sweat and pulse blazing
each slam
driving me higher

Weight soaked—
flesh burdened / primed to burst
spit's scent searing / igniting skin

Mis manos te guían, sin querer,
te jalo recio…
te la entierro…
tu garganta se rinde.

Explosión interna,
mis mecos corriendo,
hundiendo tu boca…
ninguno escapa tus labios.

Puta madre…
ya valiste, cortado.
No eres nada.
Solo un pendejo subidón
que ya bajé.

You take my core—
crowned and swollen / unbreaking
every inch
drags you under

My hands—
unthinking / hard grip
pressed under
the hollow gives way

Inside burst,
black flood,
consuming your mouth,
nothing escaping your lips

Wypierdalaj—
you're nothing
Ash left in my lungs—
just a high already burned through

Mancha
(Original—Spanish)

Lo vi jalándosela,
verga güera dura,
respirando pesado,
aliento a chela. Venía.

El cuarto
con latas vacías y tequila,
apuntes tirados,
finales desmadre.

Me volteó—
"Órale, a coger, cabrón."—
yo
con ganas
y un culito tragón.

69 hicimos,
lengua en los huevos,
bóxer manchado,
churro quemado,
piso frío.

Entró la cabeza…
culo apretado.
Pecho en mi espalda,
su trozo a pelo, seco,
y atorado.

Scored
(Translation—English)

I caught him lit against morning—
cock pale and iron-thick,
breath sour with beer,
already coming my way.

The room a ruin—
gutted cans, tequila drained,
class notes torn through,
finals unraveled to nothing.

He turned—
"C'mon, chuj."
And me—
already burning through,
my body opening to take him.

Sixty-nine—
my tongue at his root,
boxers stained,
blunt burned to ash,
floor colder than bone.

The head forced through—
tight ring, dry resistance.
His chest bearing down on my back,
cock bare,
driven in and locked.

Siempre tarareando Dylan…
voz de güero,
lobo de dos caras.

Punta roja latiendo a madres.
Escupió pa' resbalar…
Yo temblaba.

Éxtasis y trance…
"Soy tuyo, pendejo."
Colchón hundido…
resortes chillando.

Pero el güey dijo—
"No mames…
pero chacales mejor pa' esto."—
y se largó.

Se duchó,
se deslechó…
mecos al drenaje.
Entré,
dedo pa' probarlo.

Yo quería todo rendido,
tragando aire sucio,
hasta el fondo.
Puta madre.

Comí su leche,
salada y recién descargada…
al fin en mí.
Delicia,
cómo se entrega.

Callé,
culo marcado,
triunfo sobre sus putos.
Viento aullando afuera.

Still that Dylan hum—
gringo voice fraying the air,
two-faced wolf whispering in my ear.

Red crown pounding,
spit slicking the push,
my body trembling to hold him.

A cracked moan—
"I'm yours, cabrón."
The mattress sagged,
springs shrieking beneath us.

But he pulled back—
No—
"Mad-dog fucks for strays."
Then he was gone.

Shower running—
his drain of seed,
pooled on steel.
I followed,
finger raised to taste.

I wanted the whole of him—
pulling his world into my lungs,
all the way down.
So deep.

I swallowed his salt,
still hot,
finally inside me.
Euphoric—
the rush as it poured through me.

Silent—
my body scored,
a defiant, bitter-sharp win
over his strays.
Outside,
the wind howling it through.

The Receipt

by Callen S. Sor

The scorching day made the vegetables wilt and ice cream melt as we left the store. When I helped my mother load grocery bags into the trunk of the car, I felt the trapped, roasting air wafting out. Having forgotten her reading glasses, she asked me to check the receipt to make sure the quick-fingered cashier had not overcharged us.

I could not wait to get home to linger in a cool shower, but my mother had another idea—to pop into a nearby arts and crafts shop with a sale on wool and knitting needles. I no longer had the energy to accompany her and wished I had grabbed a cold soda earlier. Meanwhile, my father had succumbed to the heat and lay sprawled in the shady back seat, snoozing. He did not notice when I slipped into the searing front seat, leaving the door and window cracked open. I took my T-shirt off, fanned myself with it, and wiped the sweat off my face.

While waiting for my mother, I thought I might as well return to my schoolwork and read *The Odyssey* by Homer, a part of my first-semester syllabus at university. I reached the stanzas where the shipwrecked sailor, Odysseus, was trapped on an island by the nymph, Calypso, who had enchanted him to become her lover. The vivid scene was too sultry for such a steamy day. More sweat on my face beaded and dripped on the woodcut of the coveted captive in an open page. I wiped the salty splash off the print before it could stain and looked up to take a break.

That was when a young man caught my eye through the windshield glare and the shimmering heat above the car hood. He looked about my age and stature but more imposing, just feet away. He leaned against the light pole, focused on the Metro while waiting for the bus. He wore mirrored sunglasses, a partially unbuttoned, white, short-sleeved shirt, and a pair of formfitting khaki shorts. His bangs and the front of his shirt fluttered in the languid breezes from the passing vehicles. I wondered what he found so absorbing—I was certain that it could not have been as intriguing as Homer's words. My pulse quickened whenever he looked up, apparently searching for his bus, and maybe glancing my way too. I dropped my eyes to the book to hide my ogling. But already the ancient Greek epic had come alive in my mind, as I assumed the role of the nymph, and he was my sailor. In truth, I could have been happy with either role.

At that time of my life though, any interest I showed in him was merely pretense, given the cocoon of my self-imposed isolation—the closet. I did have a growing sense that such a place, although a haven, could ultimately stifle my chances in life and love. I wavered between staying put, in the familiar stuffy air, or bursting out, never to return. Was I not a learner whose aim was to test limits, to grow, and to thrive?

These thoughts boiled within me on that sweltering day. My napping father was oblivious to it all. Likewise, so was my mother, while she hunted for her discounts. I could not fault them for finding joy as they made ends meet and raised their son. They were likely too weary and not ready to hear anything about the developing dramas in my mind. And I was not sure yet whether to share with them the parts of me that I was still discovering. After graduation, when I understood more, might be a better time.

Suddenly, a bus pulled in. People queued up to board. The young man shifted his stance, folded his newspaper, and followed the crowd. I saw him pick up a scrap of paper from the sidewalk and glance in my direction once more. Other moving passengers then blocked him from my view.

But to my surprise, he approached. He risked missing his bus, I thought. On noticing my father dozing behind me, he whispered, "Hi…your receipt flew out of the car door…" As he handed it to me, I felt a thrill when the tips of our fingers grazed. I mumbled my thanks, but words did not flow from my dry mouth. He boarded the bus, and I followed with my gaze until he was out of sight. Would I ever see him again? Calypso kept Odysseus for seven years. My chance encounter barely lasted seven minutes—unfair but unregretted, nonetheless.

Unregretted? I could have had so much more. Why did I just sit there? Obviously, I had not learned enough from the skillful nymph. I was fuming at myself. Next time, I must catch such a gesture like the young man's, or it would die unrequited. Still moping, I unfolded the wrinkled receipt to review as my mother had requested. On it I found a scribble: "Face it—neither of us was really reading. Thanks for looking my way. Would you like to chat?"

I laughed, delirious with joy, startling my father. I told him that I needed to buy us some sodas to cool down. I swung open the car door and bolted out.

march, nyc

blood orange liquor down my throat,
hot faced. i used to dream of a purple victorian
with a yellow roof, siding caught
on ocean wind. a wrap around porch
and a rocking chair. bed and breakfast.
thick linens. when the subway starts up
it sings. you would know if you heard it.
i take my jacket off, a leather vest underneath,
black worn soft. joey tells me new york
makes her feel small,
thank god.

the punk store above the japanese bar
is too expensive for the punks stoop sitting next door,
lapping spilled beer off the stone. i don't need touch
any less than i'm getting it now. i don't want
to lean into everyone. sunflower seeds litter
the dirt mulch around new trees. it's too warm
for my jacket and too cold to take it off. we got dressed
for nothing. should've hopped the turnstile.
should've smoked in the station.

when my cats find anything new
they move their pink noses in and out,
in and out. they can't be too excited about anything.
rub their faces on a new thing to make it theirs.
my pillowcase smells so heavily of detergent. i don't dream.
rub my cheek on what scares me. hope.

the njtransit conductor tells me to have a blessed day.
i watch a toddler almost get caught
in a mousetrap. i tell his mom where he's about
to put his fingers. the woman next to me
in almost english: *thank god you see*.
thank god.

—Isabella R. Simões

a tart sweetness

the plum bruise above my knee is a story:
i went through the turnstile too quickly
and in turn received a hard, circular kiss
that was immediately sore and impossible to forget.
with the world's sweat soaked into my binder,
the woman behind the Target return counter
tells the new employee she's working with to
help the patient lady out, please. i maintain my stillness
but it does beg me to wonder how much
hair on my upper lip will result in maybe
at least a pause in that exchange. maybe
even a sorry, if i have to beg for awkwardness.
i remember Paula, sitting under our orange tree in Portugal
next to the well, seeing me walk out of the house
and confusing me for my brother. our oranges
were the size of two fists, the overripe fruit
split open on the ground. i slept outside
just to watch the fallen fruit, and somehow
when i woke up in the morning there was less sweet
rot on the ground than when i had fallen asleep
with the moon frozen onto my face.

—Isabella R. Simões

Revolving Closet Doors: My Journey Out & In & Out Again

By Eden LaFae

Like many queer men, my coming out process came about slowly and in fits and starts. My first experimentation in same-sex affection began with a kissing game with a family friend before either of us had even entered kindergarten. Also, for much of my childhood, I desperately wanted to be a girl. I had delicate features, rosy cheeks, full dark lips. I remember ancient aunties commenting when I was very young how I was "just too pretty to be a boy."

I always gravitated toward girls as my playmates. And I was thrilled to get to play with Barbies when I visited my female cousins, though I think I shocked their Southern Baptist sensibilities when I recreated spicy storylines from *The Young and the Restless* for their dolls. "You're a fool, Barbie. Ken loves me! In fact, I'm carrying his baby!" "Well, you're just a whore, Skipper! And all of Genoa City knows it!"

Being "trans" wasn't a thing back in the mid-to-late 70s—at least not in suburban North Dallas. And I wonder sometimes what course my life might have taken if I had grown up in a social context that affirmed and supported gender fluidity. But I didn't, and so instead, I hid my gender dysphoria (and later my same-sex eroticism) in the deep dark recesses of my "Best Little Boy in the World" closet.

I sublimated those feelings by directing my energy into academics and religion, while simultaneously launching myself into a lifelong career as a consummate people-pleaser, using my intelligence, sense of humor and gift of gab to divert attention from what was obvious to virtually everyone

Photo courtesy author.

except me: I was a world class flaming faggot.

In my senior year of high school, a therapist I was seeing tried to gently guide me out of my maze of self-denial. After I explained how I found some hot and sweaty road workers oddly distracting on my drive to her office, she commented, "Well, you know, being gay is a perfectly valid lifestyle alternative." I have no idea how I replied, but in my head I was thinking, "As a matter of fact, no, no one has ever told me that!"

My therapist's assertion was revelatory for me, and once I entered college, I slowly began to explore my same-sex attractions and embrace my queer identity. I read Randy Schilts' chronicle of the early years of the AIDS pandemic *And The Band Played On*, and it changed my life. Inspired by people like Bobbi Campbell, I became a dedicated volunteer at the local AIDS service organization.

There, I first saw what it looked like to be an out and proud Queer professional, though like me, these folks embraced a strongly heteronormative manner. In seeing the professionalism, empathy and kindness of these people, I slowly edged out of the closet. I spent much of my high school years focused on being an honors student and Mr. United Methodist Youth Fellowship in avoidance of my sexuality. But in the staff of that AIDS organization, I saw people who were undeniably smart and kind and Queer. And if they could all those things combined, then perhaps I could be, too.

At college, I worked at both the student newspaper and student magazine, and pushed my activist agenda through articles and op-ed pieces that I wrote about HIV/AIDS and other LGBT issues, from the somewhat detached position of the "progressive intellectual," without explicitly coming out myself. By my junior year, though, I had found a circle of Queer friends, sucked my share of dick and discovered a sense of righteous anger at both the shocking neglect of people battling AIDS and the not-infrequent instances of gay bashing. In fall of 1990, I blasted the doors off my closet with a National Coming Out day column that riffed on the notion that while many people assumed I was gay, I actually lead "secret heterosexual life," as I described the ubiquity of the heterosexual assumption in the media, advertising and society at large. I punctuated the essay with a public declaration that I would refuse to obey the societal dictates of heterosexist conformity with the popular *cri du coeur* of the moment, "I'm here! I'm Queer! Get used to it!"

The column caused quite a stir. The most letters to the editor the paper had ever received. A fraternity displayed a huge banner outside their frat house proclaiming "It's a Het World, Get Used To It." And I received multiple death threats. Good times! But for all that commotion, throughout my college years and for many years to come I was out as a "homosexual"—but a polite, well-heeled, intellectual, activist-type homosexual, who by and large hewed to a heteronormative standard, which might also be called the assimilationist closet.

Post-graduation, I launched myself into a career as an "AIDS professional," first in Dallas, then in Washington, D.C. At the time of the 1993 March on Washington, I met Rad Fae founder Harry Hay at a book signing in Dupont Circle—my first encounter with a real life Radical Faerie. I knew that he was a legendary figure in LGBT history—the founder of the Mattachine Society in the 1950s! But I didn't really know what to make of his eccentric get up—wearing a blouse, a long skirt, earrings and plentiful strands of pearls. It wasn't until several years later when I moved to San Francisco that my assimilationist mode of existence gave way to something looser, freer and more fabulous.

In 2009, I made the fateful decision to join the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. By then, I had heard many second-hand stories about the Faeries -few of them laudatory. Most of these anecdotes were told in the manner of the "cautionary tale"—heavily seasoned with judgement and pity—stories of young men who got lost in a whirlwind of copious sex and ubiquitous drugs. The Sisters (somewhat ironically) had a bit more salubrious reputation, renowned as much for their gaudy costumes as for their pioneering AIDS activism.

This was when I really emerged from the closet—when I enthusiastically embraced the joy of cross-dressing for fun and, if not profit, then for fine altruistic ends! As it happened, the particular subset of Sisters that I became close with were also very involved with the Bay Area Faeries. And that's when I finally got to meet actual Faeries face to face. And sometimes face-to-cock, and face-to-gloriously-hairy-buttholes. I attended many marvelous parties with the Fae community. We shared Dionysian feasts at elaborate Beltane gatherings. We drank mushroom tea and danced skyclad around maypoles. I took part in workshops at events like Faetopia, where, as Sister Eden Asp, I gave a talk on this new intervention called PrEP. This was in some sense my Golden

Era of "outness."

In 2014, my life took a different kind of radical turn, when I left San Francisco and moved to our family's farm in rural Arkansas. By that point, even I recognized that my wild and very "out" life in the Center of the Known Queer Universe was getting a bit out of hand. I look back on it now as my peak "mid-life crisis" years. Excessive drinking, substance use and a nearly constant quest for sexual adventures. I had, in many ways, become the cautionary tale. This wasn't so much a conscious realization as it was a deep sense that something wasn't right. That somehow my ship-of-state had drifted perilously off-course. My dinghy was in danger!

Two factors proved decisive in my decision to move to the farm. First, I had been laid off from my job and needed a sanctuary to which I could retreat and regroup. And secondarily, my father had developed Alzheimer's, and his care was becoming an increasing burden on my mom. Putting those two facts together, I concluded that the moment was ripe for some dramatic reinvention.

The move to rural Arkansas proved to be, in some measure, a return to the closet. Turns out cross-dressing, cock-sucking pagans are not super popular in the Deep South. Who knew?! The "closet" takes many forms, from wholesale deception and outright lies, to the more subtle closet of toned down eccentricity, and the art of "don't ask, don't tell" gentility, a practice developed to a high art in the Deep South. My self-imposed exile from Queerdom has been much more the latter.

After I moved back, for a short while I attended a tiny little Methodist church where my grandparents had been members years before, and where easily half the congregation were either old family friends or distant kin. My family's roots in that community go back to before Arkansas was even a state, so in the way of small Southern communities, everybody in that church knew from the start that I was "Bill and Patsy's boy, who just came back to the farm from (stage whisper) San Francisco." They might as well have said I'd just returned from Sodom.

Nonetheless, I was warmly received and promptly made chair of the social committee. They might affirm in absolute sincerity that they do not personally know any homosexuals, but by god, they realize we're darn good at organizing social events! I never hid the fact that I was gay. In conversation, I would sometimes refer to my former partner. I occasionally would mention my work in HIV/AIDS. And there was no drama. No ugly comments. Conversation would just move briskly on to other topics. But it was a far cry from my experience at Glide United Methodist back in Sodom-by-the-Sea, where I walked with congregation's contingent in the Pride March, was asked to deliver one of the weekly "I am Glide" messages in full drag as Sister Eden, and organized several drag events to benefit Glide AIDS Services. Such activities earned me the moniker "the Methodist witch" among my SF Sister and Faerie friends!

By that point, even I recognized that my wild and very "out" life in the Center of the Known Queer Universe was getting a bit out of hand. I look back on it now as my peak "mid-life crisis" years. Excessive drinking, substance use and a nearly constant quest for sexual adventures. I had, in many ways, become the cautionary tale.

In the end, though, I didn't last long at that tiny church. Less than a year into the experience, the pastor asked the congregation to pray for poor Kim Davis (the county clerk in Kentucky who refused to issue same-sex marriage certificates), I stood up and walked out of the church mid-prayer. Not only can we homosexuals organize a swell church picnic, we are also quite adept at making wordless statements in a manner that is both dramatic and dignified.

My new rural closet was not just restricted to my foray at the little church. After my father passed, I became Mom's primary companion and chauffeur, shuttling her from doctors appointments to an endless stream of "Little Old Lady Luncheons." And I am quite a hit on the Blue

Rinse Circuit—but the affection in which I'm held does hinge on a tacit agreement that I dial back my eccentricities to a delicate volume and keep my queerness on the QT.

This return to the closet wasn't without its gracious compensations. It provided a sort of "hard reset" for my life. It was as if, in an act of karmic recalibration, the Universe said "Gurl, you need a time out. You just sit your faggoty ass down and have a good long think on the choices you've been making." And in my rural isolation, I began to see how the vision of queer liberation that I had so enthusiastically embraced in my SF heyday had a strong undercurrent of self-destructive excess.

Moreover, my quiet life looking after my folks reminded me of the values they had long instilled in me—compassion, concern for others and taking up one's responsibilities with resolve not resentment. I can certainly say this return to the closet, for all its challenges and privations, has taught me to be more at ease with myself, to be more patient, to be more attentive to others.

That said, those lessons did come at a cost. Back in 2014, my move was originally conceived as just a temporary period of reassessment. Then, one year rolled into two, then three, and before I knew it, a whole decade had rolled by. And gradually what had been my safe haven morphed into a form of solitary confinement. I experienced not just an estrangement from my fellow Queers, but also an estrangement from self.

My Queer connections dwindled to an occasional reunion weekend with Sister friends in San Francisco, streamed episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the frequent buzz of text threads that still crackled with the zing of hot tea being spilled about old acquaintances, but which now reminded me of a life that seemed increasingly foreign.

Not only had I allowed my connections with other Queer men to wither to a handful of people I rarely saw, I also lost a sense of connection with my sexuality. I had unknowingly slipped into a depression, drowning my loneliness in barbeque, bourbon and weed. Clearly, my tendency to excess wasn't merely an artifact of my decadent West Coast life. I packed on fifty pounds, and was completely celibate for almost eight years.

As the COVID lockdown eased, I committed to making healthier choices in relation to food, booze and herb, and made a conscious effort to escape from the self-imposed exile of my rural closet. Thus began quasi-monthly sojourns back to my hometown of Dallas. There I met local Faeries—Rene, Delight and Dawne—and got engaged with the larger community of the Radical Faeries of Texas (RFT). And soon I was joining the monthly RFT Zoom Calls, and was drafted into the planning committee for RFT's 2025 Spring Gathering.

So it was that thirty-two years after meeting Harry Hay, and sixteen years after the Bay Area Faeries became a significant part of my social circle, I finally attended an official Radical Faerie Gathering. It was an odd feeling of being both a newbie and a seasoned veteran of radical Queerness. But at the Gathering I found a welcome escape from the closet. It was a balm to my queer soul which had been so long estranged from other same-sex-loving folk.

Of course, the journey continues and the work of self-exploration goes on. Even being in the company of heart-centered Faerie brothers and sisters could not erase ten years of cultural and sexual isolation. That kind of psycho-sexual whiplash isn't resolved in a weekend getaway. But that Gathering did provide me with three very precious things that can often seem in short supply: hope, connection and community.

The gratitude I feel towards the Radical Faeries of Texas points to the important role such a group can play in promoting greater connection among Faeries across an area as vast as Texas, where many Fae folk may, like me, exist in small, isolated communities hours away from the urban oases of Austin, Dallas and Houston. Since the spring gathering, I've collaborated with other Texas Faeries to create a statewide newsletter, Texas Fae Quarterly, and a Facebook group for Faeries across the state. In this way, the Texas Faeries have not only helped me exit my own closet, but enabled me to leverage my experience to help other Faeries who are coping with their own closets of exile and isolation.

Who knows what my life might have been like if I'd found a way to stay on in San Francisco. Certainly, the experience I have had in the closet of rural exile has been a mixed bag, filled with both challenges and blessings. Now, however, the isolation which had felt so crushing has been significantly leavened by a renewed connection with my Fae family. Together Faeries in Texas and around the world, will continue issuing their storied Call to the Queer of Spirit—guiding them out of closets of isolation and into the joyful communion of Faeriedom.

This Town

This town, punctuated with fields in between the city
Living on a mountain and plain, living in a city and village
Where I don't notice others, but others notice me
Where I don't know others, but others know me
The dulcet songs of birds, the riots of colour of butterflies
The shades of leaves, the colour of the sunset
What more is required, what more is desired
It's undulating terrain, it's fresh veggies, it's birds' song
The trees are older than my father and mother
The patriarch Banyan reminds me of the futility of running
These simple folk, *far from the madding crowd, ignoble strife*
Remain content in the present
The magpie, the robin, the koel, the munia, the kingfisher
The stork, the crane, the kite, the snake, the goat what not!
All in harmony with crickets, bats and owls
Everything is occupied by nature, the castle of stones
By spiders, the land by grass, the marsh by cattails,
The earth by the blanket of stars, here dipper, there Cassiopeia
The stalking moon filled me with calm

—Pulkita Anand

Reading Body

I want to read your body
Every part, every curve, every bone
I want to read you from head to toe
From arm to arms, across your head
I don't want to miss any page
Want to roll every syllable on my tongue
Letting every word sink into my body
Want to trek in the labyrinth of your mazy hair
Meandering maze of beautiful eyes
Though it is difficult to remember
page number of your body, I will remember
the touch of the pages on my finger,
the eyes of your page flicker with the sunshine.
The scent of your body gets smeared with
my fingers and entering my body
the introduction is so intriguing
I feel I need to reread it
To form a better understanding of your body
Or will you explain it to me page to page
line to line, word to word?

—Pulkita Anand

My Closet

by Rabbit

It all started with taking the door off my bedroom closet and putting up a curtain in its place. The bedroom is small. With the closet door open, it's a little awkward to walk around. With the door closed, I had a tendency to forget what was inside. Out of sight and out of mind. A curtain seemed like a good middle ground. Easier access to my clothes and no door jutting out into the bedroom.

Perhaps it was watching a rerun of *What Not To Wear* that inspired me to dig into my bedroom closet and give it a makeover. It was Spring after all; time for some Spring cleaning…time to donate some of those clothes that don't fit any more or only wore once.

Way in the back I found a cardboard box holding old copies of *RFD*, a copy of *Thee Psychic BIBLE* by Genesis P-Orridge and a couple of tarot decks. "I wonder if *RFD* is still in publication?" I thought to myself.

It was around this time that I joined an online forum on occult magick. Replying to a query about Brion Gysin's *Dreammachine*, I ended up chatting at length with Tomi Trembath about 'closets' and their magickal potential. While on a two day train trip, I decided to delve a little deeper…

Rabbit: First, thanks for giving me the opportunity to interview you for *RFD*. So much has changed, but *RFD* magazine is still around and still as a hardcopy, despite so many magazines going under or switching to a digital format.

I'm interested in having a conversation about the theme of 'closets,' both physical and metaphorical and how they inform/influence our lives. I am especially interested in the process of turning the tanning booth you inherited with your house and transforming it into a meditation place…

Tomi Trembath: Thank you, I really appreciate this opportunity to share my experience and my art.

I'm Tomi Trembath, I'm a comic book writer, podcaster, art producer, and trans woman based out of Iowa. I've been exploring and celebrating trans representation in comics with my podcast "Transcending Comics" for the last two years, and last year I released my own first comic "When We Transform" through Kickstarter.

While I was in the process of creating this book in 2023, I attended the Electric Forest music festival, where I discovered a form of "light reactive" color changing artwork unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was presented to me in the form of an interactive experience, where viewers were given a handheld light that would activate this effect as they explore a gallery full of psychedelic art prints from artists all over the globe. I knew that I wanted to share this experience with others, and I already had the perfect space to do so.

When I purchased my home, I inherited a DIY tanning closet built by the previous owners. I never had any interest in using this closet for its intended purpose, so for several years it functioned as a junk closet. Returning from the festival, however, I had purchased a few art prints from the company behind this color changing art technique, Colorimetry Lights, and used them to turn this tanning closet into an at-home mini art installation.

This closet became the source of a lot of creative and spiritual inspiration over the coming years. I would go on to work with Colorimetry Lights to be the first to incorporate this art style in a comic book, and I now work with other artists to produce new pieces that I sell at local music festivals and fan conventions.

More importantly, however, this closet is now my go-to meditation space, where I often come up with my best ideas. The lights and reflective walls inspire what I'd describe as a zen form of over stimulation, which keeps my AHDH mind from becoming fixated on any one idea or image.

I don't see this closet as a place to hide. For me, it's a transformative space. My creative works have often been inspired by my childhood love of shows like *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon*, and in this closet, I've found my own personal "transformation sequence" that I hope to inspire in others.

Rabbit: I want to ask you more about the closet/transformation-cocoon but first I want to ask about your exploration of color.

I'm colorblind, so my relationship to the world around me is often challenging depending on the situation (traffic lights, for example).

I read somewhere that colorblindness is an evolutionary adaptation related to hunting...I brought that up to a coworker the other day and they asked if I knew about why tigers are yellow with black stripes... apparently, it's due to the way prey per-

ceives color

Over the years I have had numerous experiences where I believe that I am looking at something that is one color, then find out it's really another and had my brain readjust what I am seeing to reflect the new information...grey 'becoming' green (right before my eyes) for instance or understanding I am holding a lemon and not an orange in my hand

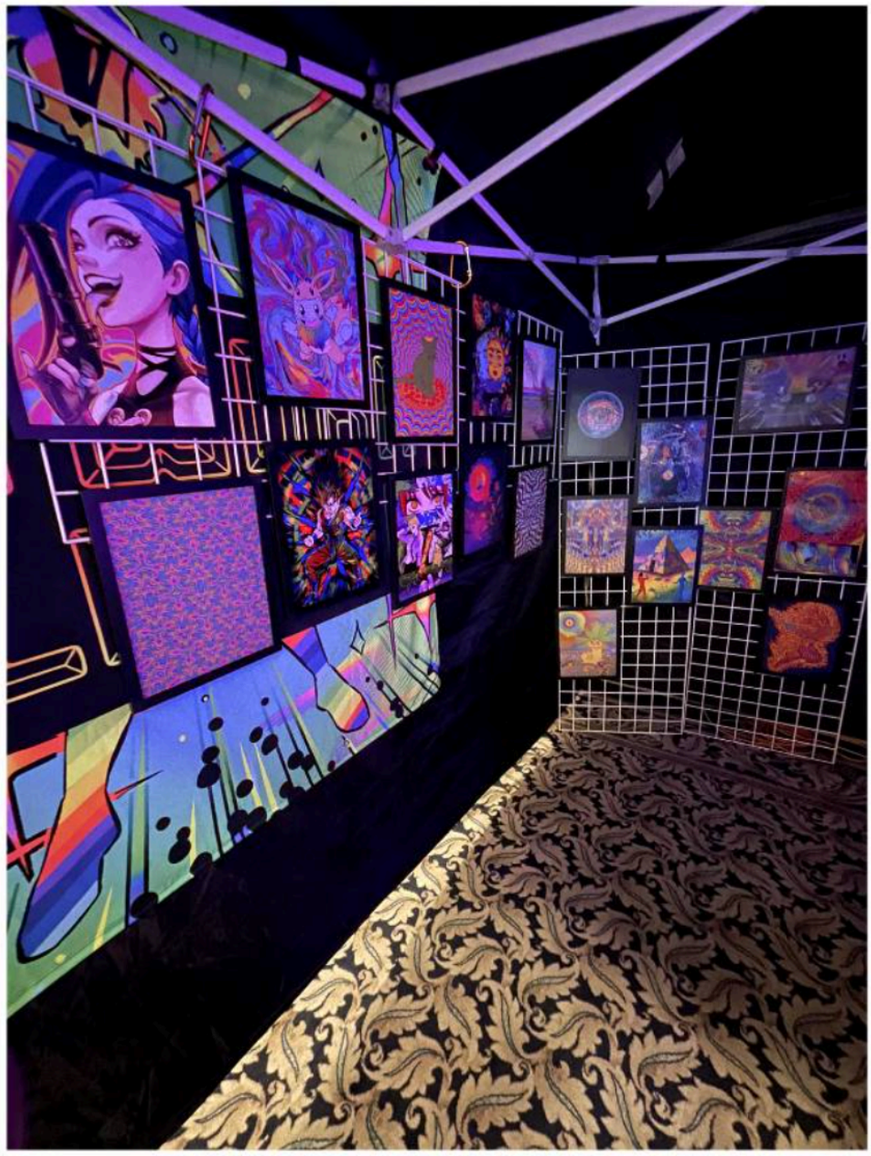
What has drawn you to explore color (both in terms of pigment and light). Do you use individual colors for their 'therapeutic' value? Aside from the festival experience, have you had other experiences with color that have been an inspiration for you? Also there's a difference between experiencing static color vs changing color... any thoughts on how motion affects perception and experience?

Tomi: So my ability to explore color and pigment on my own is a bit limited. When it comes to creating comics and producing art, I can do just about everything except for the drawing and/or painting itself. I'll write out a comic script or outline an idea for an art print, then commission artists online to bring my ideas to life in colorful detail.

For me, my inspiration comes more from the lights than the colors themselves. Music Festivals and their culture have been a major influence on my creative projects, and I've always been enamored with the lighting of the stages and art installations they have on display.

There are elements of color theory that will come into play over the course of When We Transform, but those are more related to the culture's relationship to these colors rather than their therapeutic values. Color plays a major role in the tropes of the superhero stories I'm playing with in this comic. Red always represents the leader, yellow and pink are historically "girl" colors. So what happens when a hero finds themselves with a color/role that doesn't fit their personality or skillset?

As a child, I remember seeing my favorite Power Ranger change colors between seasons, and how that also represented a change in his role on the team, from the "new guy" to the team leader, and eventually to the mentor of the next generation. Many of the superhero stories I've read in the years since suffer from having their characters stagnate in a particular status quo. I learned from a young age that a "transition" for a superhero can be as simple as acquiring a new costume, but this change can represent a lot more than just a new wardrobe.



Photograph by Tomi Trembath.

Other upcoming projects of mine lean further into the limitations of what the human eye can perceive on the spectrum of light. One in particular will be using this color changing technique as a means of visually depicting ultraviolet light after our main

character acquires the ability to see more colors in the spectrum, the same way lobsters and other sea creatures do.

As for light and color in movement, my hope is that I can bring something to the world of comics and convention spaces that inspires new ways to interact with artwork and storytelling.

I've heard of Early-human cave paintings in France that used flickering torchlights to create a sense of movement in these images, like a primitive form of animation. If cave paintings can be considered the "original comic book," or at least our earliest known means of sequential storytelling through images, then my goal is to bring the torchlight back to the medium. I may be limited in my ability to create visual art, but I know the artists I'm meeting through this endeavor can use these lighting and coloring techniques to revolutionize the way we tell a story through a seemingly static image.

Rabbit: You mention that your inspiration comes more from the lights than the color. It reminds me of the artist Brion Gysin and his Dreamachine and how you and I first became acquainted.

How has stage lighting and lighting effects impacted you? You mention it helps with meditation, and I assume trance states? Can you elaborate on how moving colored lights affect your consciousness... do different colors or rates of motion accomplish different results?

Tomi: I can only speak to my own experience when it comes to the effect different lights and visuals have on my mind. The exact results are different from one performance to the next, but I have found ways to influence the intensity of the experience.

Whenever I go to a festival, I like to bring a few dozen pairs of light diffraction glasses that I share with folks nearby. Sometimes I'll incorporate kaleidoscopic goggles as well. These do more than just enhance the visuals, they also give me a new way to explore and interact with both the physical and mental space I'm in. The refractions of light and the distortion of words and symbols around me often inspire the creation of "new" words in my mind, and allow me to access a semi-psychedelic state without the use of substances.

Rabbit: I love the idea of reading text through a kaleidoscope (and the creation of new words/sounds)...it brings a new dimension to the 'cut-up.' Also makes me think of John Burnside's teleidoscope.

Getting back to the theme of closets, I want to explore the idea of closets as a tool. A temporal/liminal space vs. a space for storage or a space for retreat/hiding/safety…I think of your tanning booth turned meditation space as a form of cocoon that provides a liminal space wherein the secrets of transformation gestate and grow...a womb (a womb with a view?) so to speak…brings to mind Clark Kent's phone booth use before flying away with his Superman cape. I'm also intrigued by the closet as a liminal space between worlds where magick happens... I'm thinking about Lucy discovering the wardrobe entrance to Narnia, for instance.

One last question. How has coming out impacted your life and why is it important today?

Tomi: I'd like to tie this back to what I was saying earlier about the importance of "Transformation" in my life. One of the more difficult things I had to come to grips with in early adulthood was seeing my friendships degrade over time, moving away from the "found families" that had been my lifeline through the most challenging moments of my 20s. I often felt like this was a personal failing, like these people were growing apart from me because I was becoming a boring, lesser version of the person they knew.

After coming to terms with my trans identity, I started to find myself in circles where I had the freedom to rediscover the person I wanted to be and what I wanted to be known for. I started to live up to that version of myself, rather than the person that I thought everyone else wanted me to be. I could throw myself fully into my interests and passions, and that attracted other interesting and passionate people into my life. It's still difficult when I lose friends or grow apart from someone I care about. But it's a part of life that's much easier to accept when I know I'm living as the person I want to be, and that the people still in my life are those that accept and encourage this version of myself.

There are a lot of people out there that want to make life for queer people miserable, and they're doing everything they can to push us out of the public eye and back into the closet. I may not know how to stop them, but I'm certainly not going to make it easy for them. There's a lot of work to be done to fight the latest waves of hate, and I worry about how the current administration's scare tactics will affect those still in the closet. So I think the best thing we can collectively do right now is to continue being our favorite selves as loudly as possible. Our closeted peers are wading through a never ending flood of frightful headlines, so be the person that leaves a lasting impression they'll never forget!

Midnight Closet

Suddenly, revealed as a woman
standing before the tall dark mirror
hands nervously tracing the outline of my nipples
through my stolen mother's slip, a shadow snapshot
of a pre-queer adolescent scene. Slowly lifting, stripping,
now deliciously nude in the night chill delight
of my reflected boyish image

Yet, revealed as a woman, I *pirouette*, dip and *plié*
my foot slides up to caresses the side of my calf,
throwing my head back, a *relevé* in profile,
observe a muscular dancer's thigh, I explore
each pore of skin. Then draping myself with scarves,
I wriggle on a jockstrap, then lacy, pale pink girdle,
foreign and frightening in the midnight silence.

In a quick panic of discovery, all is thrown off,
and scrambling, pull on tightest white, cut-off jeans.
Rubbing the thick rear seam into its natural place
that sculpts the crevice I wish filled, into two ripe halves.
One pink bulb peeks out from a frayed edge, slowly, carefully,
I transform from mimicking the poses and skills
of models and movie divas, to a Midwest teenager.

Catching this boy's eye in the mirror, I become a
sensuous stranger who stalks my parent's sleeping house
in silks and denim, unzipped and revealed, layer by layer,
decade by decade, anticipating seams ripping,
lips and legs parting, passions ripening
my innocence lost at last, with no guilt, no shame.

When finally revealed, as man, as woman, striding up and down
gay ghettoes and back alleys in all my Halloween finery, when with
dancing queens, glittered, screaming for joy, for cosmic release,
finding these all explosive revelations of hidden desires,
and dreams of small town Mama's boys no longer reflected
in a mirror, darkly.

—David Hatfield Sparks (Sparrowhawk)

The Closets I Keep and Carry

by E. Jackson

There is a misnomer that once you come out of the closet, that is it. You open the door, step into the light, and never look back. But closets do not work like that, and neither do we. While I have never seen a closet with a revolving door, I have lived behind many other types of doors: hinged, curtained, sliding, accordion, louvered. Once even one with glass, though that does not work well for my metaphor because glass offers no real hiding place.

The thing about closet doors is that they open and they close. They do not revolve. People like to imagine that once queer folk open ours, we keep them wide and welcoming forever. Maybe a lucky few can. I never could.

While I do not claim that we as queer folk own the closet metaphor, we use it profoundly, repeatedly, and often in layers. I have never had a sprawling walk-in closet. Mine are narrow, shallow, and confiningly packed with all manner of things I cannot always bring myself to unpack. Sometimes organized. Sometimes messy. Always full.

The truth is that queer folk are never the default. Which means we are always, in some way, coming out. A new job. A new neighborhood. A new person we meet at a party. Even with each other, we often play along with the default rather than challenge it outright, because to shift the baseline away from heteronormativity can be to court danger. For safety, for finances, for family, and sometimes for each other, we step back in.

From the earliest age, it was obvious I was gay, at least to the outside world. Not so for my husband. He passes. I never could. When he left our urban blue bubble, where decades of acceptance had softened our edges, and took a job in a tiny steel conservative town, I followed. And I walked back in. I did not make friends in a place that small for fear of outing him at work. I did not seek a job at the only employer in town, his employer, but drove forty minutes to another city. I walked into the closet for him and during the pandemic I quite literally stayed hidden in our attic office while he worked below.

But queerness is not the only thing that pushes us in and out of closets. We have so many.

As a legally married couple, we live behind an accordion door for his family, partially open to those who suspect but never wide enough to let them all the way in. My family sees more, yet even then the frame is narrow, the view limited, the acceptance conditional.

We have health issues we never speak of. That is a hinged door, shut firmly, reinforced, and checked twice to make sure the latch holds. Some illnesses the world is willing to hear about. Others, not so much. That door stays closed.

As gay Catholics, our closet has a sliding barn door. We nudge it open just enough to step out in Sunday best, looking for a parish and priest who will meet our eyes without judgment. The moment the service ends, the door slides shut again, sealing the light out before anyone can see too much. We have to pretend we are the "good gays" of faith, not the assless chaps parade type. We lived on a street in our urban blue bubble with a gay priest who somehow managed for decades to live with his lover and keep that closet door shut at church, but open to the queer community. It was a masterclass in the sliding door.

I think about louvered doors, the kind horror movies love when the final girl hides from the masked madman. Slivers of light and air come through and so do slivers of sight. You can see just enough to be afraid. I have had louvered doors in my own life, the kind that collect dust and trigger my obsessive compulsive disorder. I mention my OCD only to explain certain behaviors, but in the quiet recesses of my home no one knows just how bad it is. Sometimes it takes twenty minutes of checking doors' and windows' locks, outlets, and stoves before I can leave for work. Like the louvered door, I let co-workers know and joke about my OCD, but only to shine light on behavior they can see. However, in the closet of my life, that louvered door shows nothing of the pain that the OCD can bring to a human.

Curtained closet "doors" are what I have currently in my home. They exhibit my fiscal place in life which meager. As much as I try to pull them tight, they never fully close showcasing my poor fiscal decisions. When they get a stain, no Clorox wipe can remove it. The spring rod sometimes slips and I wish for nothing more than a real closet door. It feels like Oz that I'm

performatively putting something out to the world and some ruby red slipper then will out me for positing differently. As queer folk there often is no generational wealth. We are often cut out family nests, excluded from the safety of inheritance. We must forge our own path and pull the curtain apart. As older gay men, we have no generation ahead of us, those men died young. We must think, who do we leave what we have to in order to create queer generational wealth. How can I pull that curtain apart fiscally, rip it down and just leave the closet open. But I don't. I pull it shut everyday seeing the paint peel where the spring rod rubs, fear my dirty hands will stain the fabric, and I try my best to hide what's inside.

It is the mirror closet doors that have been the most confronting for me in my life. I have had hinged doors with full length mirrors on the inside where I have examined my body and hated it for whatever reason. I have had sliding doors made of mirror on the outside that made that examination all the more relentless because they could never be hidden. In those rooms I was forced, every time, to face both the internal and the external.

There is one closet I stepped out of only briefly in my life, just long enough to feel the air on my face, before pulling the door shut and retreating inside. It is not the proverbial queer closet I have opened and closed at various points in my five decades. This one has heavier hinges and a lock that works from the inside. It is the closet of childhood sexual abuse, a space that far too many queer folk also occupy.

I do not remember where I first learned it, but I have carried the knowledge that queer people experience higher rates of childhood sexual abuse and assault than our heterosexual peers. We are often trained early to keep secrets, and that makes us vulnerable to those who would harm us. I was abused by a family friend when I was a teenager. I have spoken of it once in my life. I told a friend who responded not with horror at what was done to me but at my silence.

You do realize that because you stayed silent all these years, you may be responsible for other boys like you being abused.

I do not remember my response. If I said anything, it was probably a stutter. I was shocked. This conversation happened at the height of the MeToo movement when trauma survivors were being met with public support. My silence about something that had happened thirty-five years earlier was not unusual. At the time of my teens in the 1980s, I did not fully understand what had happened to me. I did not have language for it. For years, I told myself it was fine because I was a sexually active gay teen, as if that excused a man in his forties for what he did to a sixteen-year-old. I know differently now. I understand grooming. I understand abuse of a minor. What I had not understood was the idea that a victim could be blamed for future victims because of their silence and trauma response. Her words landed like a deadbolt sliding into place. I carried them into the closet with me and shut the door.

My sister came forward years ago about sexual abuse by a great uncle and was met with skepticism by our mother. Our mother took the disclosure as a personal attack on her parenting and never fully believed her. Most of our family did not either. Like accordion closet doors, my mother folded the truth in on itself, creasing and compressing it until it barely resembled what had been said. The panels bent at awkward angles, never opening all the way, always springing back toward closed. Every time my sister tried to widen the gap, they snapped shut with the sharp, unforgiving sound of slats hitting the frame.

Between being told I was partly responsible for my abuser's actions and watching my sister be met with disbelief, I chose to remain in the closet about my own abuse. I have not told anyone in my personal life. I process it in various ways, some healthy, many not. I still hear the accusation in my mind every time I look in the mirror, a mirror on the inside of the closet door. I hear the way my sister's truth was turned into an attack on the family rather than support for her.

The closet can be a safe space. As a child, I would read behind the sliding doors of my bedroom closet when I was frightened of the knotty pine paneling in my room that seemed to watch me through its whorls and knots. During the height of my addiction, when I hallucinated intruders, the closet was the only place I felt safe. My husband feels safe at work by being in the closet. Our marriage feels safer in the closet with his family, where we fear interference. My memory of sexual abuse also feels safer in the closet. I do not erase the memory, but I do not share it publicly. I know I might be met with accusations of enabling future abuse through my silence or with disbelief. I work with professionals to keep that closet door from closing completely, but I keep it shut enough to feel safe.

As our rights as queer folk begin to erode and as jobs and housing become places of discrimination for those living behind MAGA red lines, I do not fault anyone who needs to be in the closet to preserve their livelihood. When, and I do mean when, Obergefell is overturned, some will choose the closet for many reasons. Some closets have louvered doors that let in air and light. Some have curtains you can slip behind in an instant. Some have heavy wood doors with locks. All of them open and close. Those of us who can be out should be out, but we must respect those, like me, who still need the door between themselves and the world in order to feel safe today.

This multimedia piece, 'Steffan,' was painted during the pandemic and is a representation of an alienated middle-aged man living alone in a small town in Midwestern America who is contemplating 'coming out of the closet.' He is gazing into an idealized future where he could 'come out' without repercussions (emotional, social, being rejected, etc.). However, the milieu in which he lives differs greatly from his imaginings, and he is very worried of what people would think. —Finn Haig

"Steffan" by Finn Haig. Multimedia on canvas, 46 x 46 inches.

The Other Survivor's Guilt: Confessions of a Coward

by Hot Potato / David Rumsey

They say that history is written by the victors. And while that may be true, the real story can often be found in the unspoken memories of the losers. As the memories the fog of war that was the early HIV epidemic in the 1980s start to fade, a certain romantic myth has begun to form around that time. A myth of a unified LGBT community, full of fearless ACT-UP soldiers who took to the streets and forced the government and pharmaceutical companies to find a cure to the deadly disease that was devastating the community. There is a lot of truth in this fairy tale, and a lot of faeries as well. There is no doubt in my mind that without the courage and fearlessness of many gays and lesbians of that time, we would never have the drugs that are currently keeping HIV-positive people alive, let alone a prophylactic treatment, such as PrEP.

However, as a person who lived through those tumultuous times in my twenties, the history of the AIDS epidemic is actually much more nuanced. Much more messy. As wars often are. They are not just filled with warriors and villains, but with cowards, accomplices and a lot of innocent bystanders.

The term "survivor's guilt" is a term coined after the Holocaust in World War II to describe the feeling that many people develop after witnessing mass death all around them. It has also been applied to those people who watched their friends, lovers and entire social circles collapse during the onslaught of AIDS from 1981-1996. After the massive trauma and loss, it can leave survivors with the uncomfortable, existential question of "Why did everyone else pass and not me?" The universe can seem particularly cruel and confusing.

Yet for me, "survivor's guilt" means something else. I am not confused. I know why I made it through the minefield of those years. I survived because I did whatever I thought I needed to do to stay uninfected. Things I am not proud of. Things that I am hesitant to reveal. But things I have learned that other people also did. Thoughts, feelings and actions many of my peers are only confessing to now, when the AIDS epidemic appears to be nearing its final phase. It can feel safe to confess one's crimes when the consequences of those crimes are fading into history.

Perhaps the biggest crime of all was denial. And the denial began from the very beginning. They call it the "fog of war" because it is often difficult to know when a war has broken out or even when it is truly over. It is too easy to simply deny that the war is even taking place or affecting you.

I first lost my gay virginity in a furtive, explosive romp of oral sex with another closeted gay student on my university dorm floor in early 1983. At that time, word of a new "Gay Plague" was still a whisper, or a joke. Yet, while zipping up my pants after our encounter, the handsome, young man who took my virginity looked up from the bed and said, jokingly, "Oh, by the way I have AIDS." We laughed, albeit nervously. For us, AIDS was a disease for older gays or gays in New York or San Francisco. For gays in the fast lane. It wouldn't possibly affect two young twinks in Canada. Little did we know that we were precisely the target demographic where the disease would flourish. The young, the dumb, and the full of cum.

But then the war hits home. Either you yourself get hit by the disease, or someone you know gets infected. What was worse at that time was that you didn't actually know who was infected because the symptoms might not appear for years. It was like some kind of zombie apocalypse of the walking dead. Everyone was terrified of what might be lurking within.

In a way, I was lucky to learn of a family friend who had attended the same university just before me but who passed of AIDS. He was just three years older than me. Going to the same clubs and bars. Perhaps dancing and playing around with the same people. It was a wake-up call that brutally pierced my ears, sending me scrambling. It only takes one or two deaths—or even rumors of deaths—to make you feel like the disease is all around you. That's when the flipside of denial arrives: paranoia.

Of all the effects of war, it is the messaging that has the longest impact. The myths and misinformation that arise can take decades to stop circulating. And the amount of myths and misinformation around HIV/AIDS was overwhelming in the begin-

ning. Eventually, the actual cause of the disease, i.e. the Human Immunodeficiency Virus was identified, despite several competing theories. However, the routes of transmission for the virus remained unclear for years, leaving the rumor mill to fill in the gaps.

Around 1986, I remember hearing that you could get infected with HIV from mosquitos. That seemed a little far-fetched, but so did the warning about sharing razors. But that didn't stop me from wearing long sleeves that summer or switching to an electric razor. Moreover, the actual risks associated with oral sex and even kissing took years to clarify for the public. That confusion and the ensuing, low-grade paranoia effectively pushed me back in the closet all over again, despite that one episode in 1983, which haunted me for years. From then on, I took matters into my own hands, so to speak.

It wasn't until 1988 when I could finally recover from that furtive blowjob five years earlier. That was when I was finally willing and able to get tested for the first time. After the tall, bearded nurse in leather pants and a lab coat gave me my negative results, he asked bluntly, "So, are you fucking yet?" Shocked and yet awed by him, I replied meekly "No". "Good!" he bellowed in return. "Don't start. Don't scratch that itch. There are lots of things you can do besides fucking."

I took that advice to heart…as much as I could. The boyfriend I had recently started dating at the time (hence the need for testing) wasn't a fan of butt play either, and we avoided it for years. But when we finally did, we did it without protection.

Both of us shared a certain amount of unspoken guilt about that. We knew what we were doing was not "safe". Yet, we assumed that we would be OK because we were monogamous and because we never climaxed during intercourse. These are probably naïve beliefs to a contemporary reader these days, but a big part of the denial of that time was a denial that we might be mistaken.

As we also saw during COVID, once people have adopted a strategy for surviving an epidemic, it is very difficult to change their minds. The original, fear-based messaging of the 1980s was actually quite effective. And while much of my survival strategy was based in a fear and shame about sex, it was also based on avoiding people who were or might be carrying the virus.

For us, the easiest way to avoiding the virus was to head to the hills and hide in the forest. Which is what my now husband and I did in 1990. We purchased a small farm in the middle of nowhere, hours from any gay bars, and hoped to ride out the storm of AIDS quietly from a distance. The gay world and AIDS seemed a million miles away. At first.

When I did manage to visit gay venues on business trips or vacations, this ruthless and shameful fear of AIDS manifested as lingering glances to look for facial wasting or unusual body fat distribution among the attendees of a bar or gym…before I gave them a kiss. No matter how dry. Or it showed up as probing questions about previous health issues or body counts…before giving them a hug or a hand job. Despite all my mental reassurances, the question of "What if the science is wrong? What if it's not really safe?" always hung in the background.

What made the fears worse was my inability to actually talk about them. Openly asking someone about their HIV status was and is not always easy. Not for the person being asked, but for the asker, who doesn't want to appear openly discriminatory or deal with the conflicting emotions of desire for intimacy and fear of the disease. So, it's easier to retreat into the safety of silence. That silence was another crime I was often guilty of along with many of my peers.

While silence may indeed equal death, as the ACT-UP slogan rightfully proclaimed, ignorance can still feel like bliss. For many of us who came of age with the specter of a silent, gruesome disease hovering over our seemingly insatiable sexual urges, any bit of respite from the war was welcome. Simply learning about HIV/AIDS might bring up the anxiety of new threats, the passing of acquaintances, or new, conflicting health recommendations.

For me and many of my gay friends riding out the war in the shadows, getting involved meant bringing the war home. Getting involved meant seeing the gruesome wounds of Kaposi Sarcoma lesions up close or facing the frustrating effects of AIDS-related dementia. Scariest of all was the brutal truth that "this could be you".

And a few times, it would be people we knew. Despite my best efforts to escape the effects of AIDS, I would still hear of the passing of others. And in those cases, people would often address the disease indirectly. "I think he is sick," they would say. I remember attending the funeral of a colleague who had died suddenly of liver failure, as a result of his HIV infection in 1992. As we remembered his quick wit and mourned his tragic death, no one—not even his lover—mentioned the word "AIDS" during the entire funeral. It was as if saying the word "AIDS" was like summoning up a demon, which few of us were willing to risk.

Instead, I sought to keep the disease at bay by quietly and cowardly mailing in a cheque to my local AIDS charity to appease the gods of fate. At my best, I did get involved by working at a kitchen that provided meals to people who were living with HIV/AIDS. It was a two hour drive to the city, but it was also far away from the "front lines" of the epidemic. It was a way of being involved and but avoid seeing the disease up close. I always felt guilty about that. I felt like I should have been able to do so much more, but my fear and cowardice always got the best of me. I ultimately had to quit working in the AIDS kitchen because I just couldn't handle the discomfort of hearing about the passing of so many of the recipients, much less tolerate the reports of the brutal conditions they were living in. Lonely, emaciated men hoping for any soul to stop by and drop off a bit of food…that few could hold down. I felt helpless, guilty and angry at myself and the entire world.

Over time, that guilt-filled anger became a hardened cynicism, based in fear and fostered by mixed messaging. As the years past, various treatments for AIDS, such as AZT or Q-compounds, came and went. Various guidelines about kissing or oral sex also came and went. But by the time "the Cocktail" arrived on the scene in 1996, myself and the people I knew already had our strategies for avoiding HIV infection in place—flawed and cowardly as some of them might be.

That well-worn cynicism remains firmly entrenched to this day in many places. Despite the arrival of PreExposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) against HIV, it has not been an easy sell, particularly among men over forty-five who witnessed the early epidemic. Many of us are like shell-shocked soldiers who have been hiding in the trenches for forty years. We are still relying on the same information that was available in 1996 when the first anti-retroviral therapy was released.

Indeed, the messaging about anti-retroviral therapy at that time was conflicting enough: there's a simple pill you can take to treat the disease and you shouldn't fear it—but it's still a dangerous disease that can kill you, if the side effects of the treatment don't. Like I said, it is the messaging that has the longest impact in a war.

So how do we reach these people? Not just the older gay veterans like myself, but also younger gay men who start heading for the hills when the reality of gay life and HIV hits home for them. Simply telling people, "not to fear, a magic pill is here", is truly magical thinking.

Fear and confusion are the symptoms of the epidemic that HIV-negative people suffer from the most. Fear is a protection mechanism, and people don't let go easily. It took me almost forty years to realize that as an HIV-negative man, I was also a victim of the epidemic just as much as my positive brethren. Acknowledging people's fear without shaming them can put those emotions in perspective and provide a sense of safety and a willingness to learn.

Despite the arrival of PreExposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) against HIV, it has not been an easy sell, particularly among men over forty-five who witnessed the early epidemic. Many of us are like shell-shocked soldiers who have been hiding in the trenches for forty years.

Secondly, make the messaging simple and consistent. That relentless fear-based messaging in the 1980s is what created the current intransigency. There are a lot of details about how to take PrEP, its efficacy and its various side effects, etc. But the bottom line is that these drugs work—even without condoms. Once people buy that message they can work out the details later.

The last, and probably most challenging, thing to admit is that we do not know all the answers. As the renowned AIDS activist Richard Berkowitz said, "people prefer simple answers to complex problems even when they are wrong." Yet, if the second global epidemic in my life, COVID-19, taught me anything, it is that science is the process of asking questions more than it is the process of finding answers. But just because science doesn't have all the answers doesn't mean it isn't worth listening to.

Life is filled with change and ambiguity—as well as risk. That is an actual certainty. When we admit that, we can adjust our expectations, overcome our fears, and allow ourselves to hope for a cure to HIV. That glimmer of hope will help those of us still hiding in the hills to begin to see the forest through the trees, and to have the courage to find our way out of the rubble of war.

How a Girl Disappears

Start by swallowing the words.
Hold them behind your teeth
until your jaw aches.
Learn to taste blood
when you bite down on “help.”

Fold your shoulders inward,
so no one can see the curve of your spine.
Press your knees together so tightly
you forget how to run.

Watch your hands tremble in your lap.
Imagine they belong to someone else —
a girl who still laughs in open fields,
a girl you can’t remember being.

Avoid mirrors.
If you must look, blur your eyes.
Count each bruise like a secret star chart.
Name them after all the apologies
you never got.

Listen for his footsteps,
the door creak, the hush before danger.
Train your body to freeze
before the threat even arrives.

Shrink your voice into a whisper,
then into a silent nod.
An “Okay”, when you must
say “yes” without moving your lips.

With each passing day,
forget the taste of birthday cake,
the softness of your favorite stuffed bear,
the way your name used to sound
when someone called it with love.

Make yourself so small
you can slip behind curtains,
into closets,
into the space between heartbeats.

If you do it right,
you’ll become an outline.
A ghost in your own bed.
A girl-shaped silence
no one can hear scream.

—Sam Harty

Memoirs From a CLOSET
by Brent Calderwood
I'VE ALWAYS FELT DIFFERENT...
ONE DAY IN THE LOCKER ROOM AFTER FRESHMAN P.E....
BRENT'S A QUEER! BRENT'S A QUEER! BRENT'S...
THEY WENT ON YELLING FOR 5 MINUTES. MY OWN PRIVATE HELL HAD BECOME PUBLIC PROPERTY. WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER, I HAD TO PRETEND TO EVERYONE--INCLUDING MYSELF--THAT I DIDN'T CARE...
...BUT SECRETLY I WANTED TO DIE.
I began cutting school, weeks at a time, and I quickl dropped from a 4.0 GPA to D's an F's. When I was expelled from San Leandro High Schoo in December 1989, my mother sent m to live with my father and stepmot
Dear Laurie,
Your secret made me realize that I can't waste my life living a lie. So I'm going to tell you something I've never written down or even said aloud in my life: I'm gay.
Love, Brent
P.S. Please forgive me.
I WAS AFRAID TO FACE HER AGAIN...
NO TURNING BACK NOW...
US MAIL
SO YOU'RE GAY... I HAVE BROWN HAIR. WHAT'S YOUR POINT?
LAURIE LEFT FOR COLLEGE IN THE FALL. BUT WITH HER HELP, I DISCOVERED A GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH GROUP.
PACIFIC CENTER for human growth
2712 Telegraph Ave, Berkeley
(510) 841-6224
23 and under group
Saturdays: 1:30 pm to 3:00pm
THIS YEAR, I SPOKE TO THE STUDENT COUNCIL.
I'M BIG, I'M TALL, BUT A LIVERMORE HIGH, I'VE FE INVISIBLE. THE SCHOOL PRET STUDENTS LIKE ME DON'T E NOT ANYMORE.--I WA COUNSELORS AND FACULTY BE EDUCATED ABOUT GAY A TRANSGENDER YOUTH. AND I W YELLING "FAGGOT" TO HAV CONSEQUENCES.

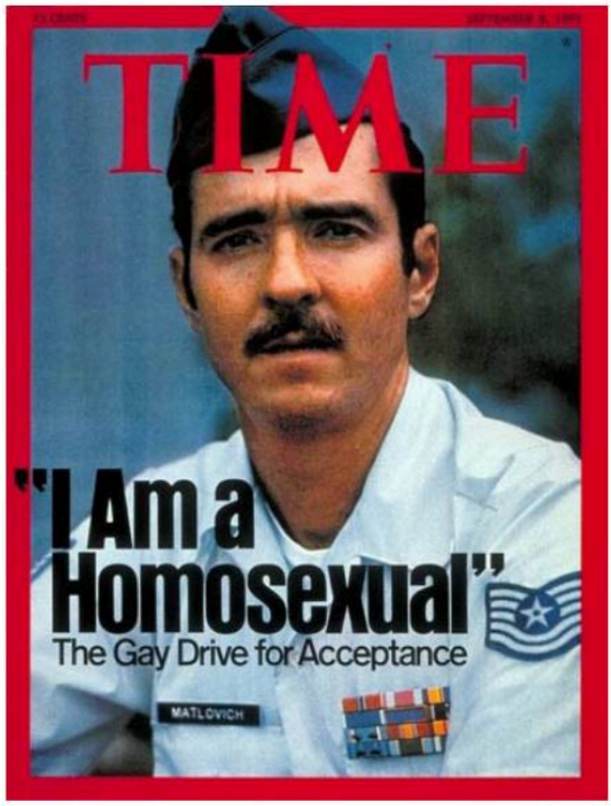
I WAS SHY AND AWKWARD, AND THE OTHER KIDS TEASED ME WITH THE WORST WORDS THEY COULD THINK OF...
FAGGOT
HOMO
HOW COULD THEY KNOW? I COULD BARELY ADMIT IT TO MYSELF.
WHEN I WAS 13, I BECAME ANOREXIC. I LOST 50 POUNDS, GOT CONTACT LENSES, AND GREW 2 INCHES.
FAG
I STARVED MYSELF TO LOOK LIKE THE OTHER KIDS, BUT I STILL FELT DIFFERENT INSIDE.
I MADE NEW FRIENDS AT LIVERMORE HIGH SCHOOL EASILY ENOUGH, AND I HAD A CHANCE TO BUILD A NEW REPUTATION...
LOOK AT THAT GUY OVER THERE! WHAT A QUEER!
YEAH... HEH, HEH.
BUT SOMETHING ABOUT LAUGHING AT "FAG JOKES" TURNED MY STOMACH.
THEN I MET LAURIE. I WAS A SOPHOMORE AND SHE WAS A SENIOR. I WAS USUALLY DEPRESSED AND SHE WAS ALWAYS HAPPY. BUT SOMEHOW WE BECAME FRIENDS.
HI...
HI!
THAT SUMMER, LAURIE TOLD ME THAT SHE HAD BEEN RAPED.
WE WERE BOTH COUNSELORS AT A KID'S CAMP...
HAD NEVER TALKED TO AN ENLY GAY PERSON BEFORE. SO BEING IN A ROOM FULL OF OPENLY GAY PEOPLE WAS BOTH EXCITING AND NERVE-WRACKING.
THE NEXT STEP...
MOM...
WHAT IS IT, HONEY?
I'M... IT'S SOMETHING I'VE KNOWN FOR QUITE A WHILE
WERE YOU SEXUALLY ABUSED?
NO.. I'M G- I'M...
IS IT ABOUT YOUR SEXUALITY?
YES...
OH, HONEY, ALL I EVER WANT IS FOR YOU TO BE HAPPY.
I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT -- AFTER 16 YEARS OF SILENCE!
WHAT A QUEER
YEAH... HEH, HEH
FAG
HEY! HE'S COOL!
53
THINGS ARE DIFFERENT AT SCHOOL NOW. SOME CREEPS CALL ME "FAGGOT." BUT THAT'S THEIR PROBLEM, NOT MINE.
NOBODY WILL EVER SLAM THE CLOSET DOOR IN MY FACE AGAIN.
BC 193
THE END
...and a new beginning.

Behind Enemy Lines

by Source Aurora

Wandering into our classic 1970s family room, I notice the new edition of *Time* magazine sitting on top of our hunkering wooden TV console. On the cover is a soldier in uniform. The bold headline is four words. At eleven years old, the first three words are simple enough for me to read. I AM A. I am a smart, sensitive boy. I AM A boy eager to read. I AM A boy curious about the larger world outside my dark, paneled home. The fourth word in the magazine headline is new to me. It is longer and more complex. It has an X in it and that stops me. A word with an X is a challenge.

Sounding it out, one syllable at a time, I give the word my best effort. In a classic moment of Freudian truth, I put it altogether. I AM A HO MO SEX UAL I say aloud to the shag carpet and orange formica kitchen counter.



It's unusual. In a family of eight, the family room is mostly vacant. Only my overworked Catholic mother is there in adjoining kitchen. Upon hearing my words, she spins around from her pots at the stove and stares angrily at me. Looking at the magazine and then back at me, a slow understanding emerges. "Isn't that disgusting" she replies distractedly. Turning back to her pot roast, her alarm and revulsion dissipating.

Looking at the magazine again and feeling into the disdain in my mother's voice, a shadowy truth suddenly crystallizes within me. Somehow, I know that whatever this soldier is that I am as well. It is called A HO MO SEX UAL. I too am a homosexual. Although I don't know exactly what that means yet about me as a person or for my life, I now know that my mother DEFINITELY doesn't approve of homosexuals. Clearly doesn't want a HO MO SEX UAL in her home eating her pot roast.

Looking back, I knew that I was also a HOMO SEXUAL years earlier. In kindergarten, I wanted to touch, to be close friends with and was somehow slightly afraid of Stevie Beaulieu. Stevie had shiny blond hair cut into a simple bowl and when he was near, it amplified a magical feeling in me. An excitement that I intuitively knew to keep to myself.

This 'disgusting' moment with my mother and the soldier brings that earlier feeling and confusion into rapid focus. In that instance, I realize that I can no longer hide behind my childish innocence. I now need to hide in earnest. It is a small moment of trauma but the effects are huge. The new found conscious awareness of my dangerous situation pivots my world.

In my alliance with the homosexual soldier, I become a homosexual warrior as well. Not because I want to make war, but because that's when I begin to worry. I take the war zone of the closet consciously, deliberately into my small self. Assessing my situation, I know that I am too young, too weak to face adult challenges. Too vulnerable to survive the consequences of discovery. I immediately go undercover and like an assassin, I kill the truthful adult version of myself. Without a second thought, I destroy the personality I would never grow up to be. The unself-consciously authentic version of myself.

I like to say that aside from growing up in the closet, my childhood was beautifully facilitated. With pot roast and clean beds, I had access to every kind of creativity my young mind wanted to explore. Art lessons, dance, singing and music. Looking back, I'm sure I was hiding in plain sight. Anyone with eyes

could see my sweet, creative sensitivity. And holding my secret didn't prevent me from performing in musicals. The fantasy land where many other closeted gay boys gravitated.

At Sunday dinners, I would regularly receive alerts from my family over the intercom in my closet. "Attention! Attention! Any and all closeted homosexuals within earshot! Please remain firmly in your closet! We are out here! The ones who pay the bills and remain in power are not prepared for or willing to adapt to the idea of your confusing and burdensome sexual truth. Please, remain in hiding until further notice! That is all."

"Homosexuals should be lined up and shot," says my brother. Shocked, I look to my mother. "Did you hear what he just said?" I ask her, to which she tacitly says nothing. "I would never pay for a gay kid of mine to go to college," my father drops into the conversation out of the blue. Little did he know there are two of us college bound homos sitting right there in front of him, spooning mashed potatoes and gravy into our open mouths. Jaws dropped, eyes darting back and forth between us, my sister and me, clear messages received.

As a teenager, I know exactly who and what I am. After masturbating for the umpteenth time to images of Burt Reynolds, there is no denying the truth in my body. The way Burt's thick, dark chest hair flows dangerously lower, disappearing into the hot, power center between his legs. The thought of putting my face in there makes my eyes go wide with heat and my adolescent cock jump and twitch.

Burt Reynolds is the first to turn me into a beast, setting me free from the textured formica walls of the tiny basement bathroom and the mildly oppressive regime I am living under. One afternoon, Burt roughly rubs his hairy chest all over me. I shoot a huge load in my mouth with my legs snaking up the wall. Buttoning his shirt, Burt winks knowingly at me before disappearing for a short break. I look in the vanity and my future self breaks in to speak to me over the intercom in my closet.

"Geez Lui, look at yourself. You've got cum all over your face. Let's face facts here. You are (whispering) A HOMOSEXUAL! Unfortunately, the folks here are not on board with that, but I'm here to tell you, it's all gonna be ok. In fact, it's gonna be great! One day, when you leave this house for good, you're gonna go out into the world and frolic in a field of hairy chests and suck miles of cock. Just take heart, sweet boy. Know that it's coming. Just around the bend. But for now shhhhh…mums the word."

I took heart in his/my words. And he was right. Like Dorothy landing in Oz, my depressed black and white world opened up in technicolor on my very first day of college. While unpacking my Flash Dance poster in my dorm room, my life-long best friend walked in the door. When I first heard the reedy lilt of a sweet gay boy and noticed his white Capezio dance shoes, I knew I was homo home free. I came out of that closet that fall and unfurled my iridescent wings into the joyful, erotic animal I knew myself to be all along.

I like to say that aside from growing up in the closet, my childhood was beautifully facilitated. With pot roast and clean beds, I had access to every kind of creativity my young mind wanted to explore. Art lessons, dance, singing and music. Looking back, I'm sure I was hiding in plain sight.

Oftentimes, our wounds are what forges our gifts. The damage of the closet lives on in the worrier in me. Not warrior as in war. Warrior, as in worry. It's there in the uncomfortable distances I still carry with my birth family. It's there in the crankiness that arises when I don't feel safe or seen. But I can see now that growing up in the closet was a cocoon for fashioning the tools I now hold most sacred.

Keeping my secret kept my heart closed to my family. It was not safe to be open and honest, making it impossible to be vulnerable. And now, my work in the world is all about opening hearts. Creating intimacy. Encouraging vulnerability.

Perhaps I didn't kill the authentic version of myself after all. After all these years, he's here. He's not the unchallenged version I once mourned. He may have been a bit battered and bruised while bursting from the hard confines of the closet, but like a butterfly pushing its way out from a chrysalis, the struggle is an essential ingredient that makes its wings strong.

I never thought I would say this but the closet was a gift. It was for me an evolutionary bootcamp. I will know no other life without it and in part, it made me who I am. Now, kick rocks, closet! I AM A HOMOSEXUAL. And that's not OK, that's just great!

Four Times He Saw His Father Naked

by Tom Diggs

The first time he saw his father naked the boy was seven, and they were at home. The father passed by the open door of his son's bedroom, pausing on the way to the shower—completely naked. A lean, tall, handsome man, striding confidently. His penis glistened, bobbing like a slinky against matted pubic hair.

The boy pretended to be asleep, but the eyes of his soul were wide open, watching every move, studying the gentle sway of the cock as it banged against his father's thighs, much longer than he ever imagined a cock could be. The man was more than just a father now.

Moments later, the boy would hear the showerhead, but he could not wash away the imprint of the dangling slinky and what he hoped to be, to have, to touch.

The first time he saw his father naked, the boy didn't understand that he was queer. Even though he was starting to feel tingly whenever he sat near another boy, he knew it was best to keep some things secret. Like how he kissed the photo of Neil Armstrong each night before hiding it under his pillow.

Decades later, the son would understand that the first time he saw his father naked, his father had just fucked his mother. The father must have known his son would end up queer. Parading naked in front of him became a performance, a sweet-incest dare that only a straight father could offer a queer son.

The second time he saw his father naked, he was barely a teenager, and they were in a cheap motel far from home, stranded in a blizzard. Separate beds.

The father stepped out of the motel bathroom and strode naked to his bed.

"Just us men," he said.

Still lean, but his cock no longer dangling like the first time. Seemed everything was growing smaller as the boy grew older.

"This is our time, son. Ask me anything you want."

The son grew silent.

He had already experimented with other boys, learning the secret permission of silent caresses, the salty taste of an unwashed cock, and the soft brillo scratch of young pubic hairs against his cheek. He fantasized about the infinite possibilities of sleepovers.

"Ask me anything you want," the father said again. "Anything."

The boy remained silent, thinking … What would I ask? … Do I have to swallow every time? Who gets to decide if I'm a top or a bottom? How could something that feels so good be considered bad?

"Ask me anything you want, son."

And the son replied, "When will I ever find my way home?"

This time, silence found the father.

The third time he saw his father naked was at the YMCA a few days before the father retired. The visiting son studied his father in the open shower, barrel-chested now from a life of careless pleasures. Revelation: his father had been a grower, not a shower. Worse now after the surgery.

The father had never learned to ask about details of his son's life. About the coke addict friend the son had driven to the treatment center. About the AIDS buddy he'd taken care of for years who recently died of meningitis. Or about the nice guy he was thinking about settling down with.

The father had never learned to share details of his own life. His son never knew his father's PSA levels, how frightened he was to lose his work identity, or how bereft he'd felt since the passing of his wife, the son's mother. In the shower at the YMCA, the son only saw a father on the wane.

When the father took him to the airport at the end of the week, he got choked up, but neither had the courage to say I love you.

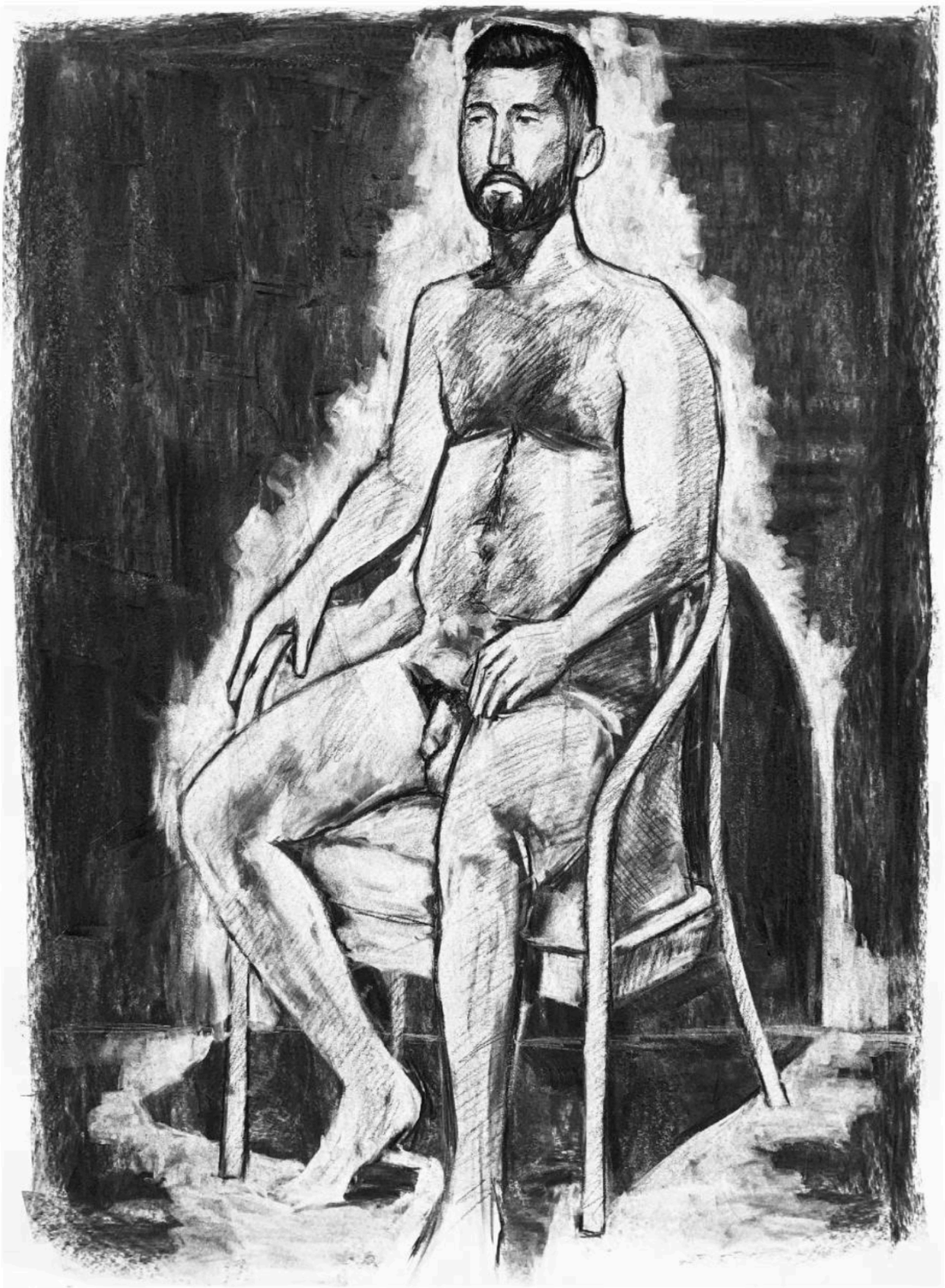
The fourth time he saw his father naked was last summer. He never takes his partner of twenty years with him to see his father on the East Coast. The father wouldn't understand that this was the man who had brought out the best in his son. The man who taught him how to listen and risk and cherish as fully as the day allows.

The fourth time he sees his father naked, his father can barely walk from his bed to his toilet to his bed. The son keeps an eye on him as he pees. The father rarely hits the bowl. He then returns to his chair where he sits in his warm pee until it gets cold and finally evaporates leaving only the sour smell of ammonia.

"Some days, I can't find my pecker," says the father. After so many surgeries, the father—or someone—has to reach up inside to find it.

When it is time to say goodbye, the father squeezes the son's hand with his gnarled fingers. This could be their final farewell. "Do you have to go so soon, Son?"

The son kisses his cheek and says, "Yes, Father, it's time for me to go home."



"2.5 Hour Pose of Tim" by Donald Patten.

Closets Don't Have Closets

by Jan Nathan Falling Long

When my friend Pretty was searching for an apartment, an agent showed her a place that had a tiny room, which had a tiny closet. Pretty asked the agent, "Is this room a bedroom or a closet?

The agent got upset, as though my friend were insulting her personally. "It's a bedroom!" she insisted. "Don't you see it has a closet? Closets don't have closets!"

***

According to Samuel Delany, the origin of "coming out" is not about coming out of the closet, but like a debutante announcing herself to the world. But either way, I don't really believe in the idea of the closet or "coming out" as metaphor. On the one hand, it's always seemed too simple a metaphor, the idea of a door either open or closed, when I think most queer people make decisions about how much to share about their personal life all the time, whether they use the word partner vs boyfriend or girlfriend, or when they choose to let go of their lover's hand in public when it seems unsafe. And, the metaphor seems to suggest that you are leaving one identity and coming into another one, when it seems many queer folk—especially in the last couple of decades—change their identities as they age and the culture offers more terms that fit them better. Does that mean we are born locked in a series of closets we need to discover and break out of? Does it ever end?

On the other hand, I think the idea of coming out of the closet is a form of oppression itself. That is, if society creates a homophobic closet that we are born into, having to come out of it is a further burden, an extension of that homophobia, because it suggests that if you want to be queer, you have to do the work of announcing it to the world, when it should be the work of the world to find out.

***

When I was a senior in college, I lived in a group house with four friends. One of them, Andy, was a boy I had some sort of intimate relationship with that seems, even to this day to defy any labels. But we slept in each other's beds almost every night and spent hours every day together.

After I graduated, one of other housemate-friends I'd lived with, Phil, came to visit me in my new group house in Baltimore. He saw a gay paper on my desk and looked surprised. "I didn't know you were gay," he said.

"Didn't you know I was with Andy all last year?" I said.

"I wasn't sure," Phil said. "But why didn't you just tell me?" I could see he was hurt, as though I hadn't trusted him enough as a friend to tell him. But that wasn't the case, really.

"Phil," I said, "it's not my job to keep track of who knows and who doesn't know who I'm attracted to. That's too much work—like a full-time filing system job."

He looked blankly at me as if he'd never considered that he wanted me to come to him, to tell him. That he as a straight guy, he didn't expect to do any work.

"Plus," I said, "I don't quite use the label gay for myself. I'm attracted to whomever I'm attracted to, and I don't want to define that. If I said I was gay and then was with a woman, people would say, 'But I thought you were gay!' It's just not my job tell or to update everyone I know."

Phil didn't say anything, and he still seemed hurt, but that was not my fault.

***

A guy I dated once, Mark, told me of an incident when he was still "closeted" in high school. He hung out with only straight friends pretending to be straight. But one day, when one of them asked, "What's your favorite part of a woman's body?" Everyone answered whatever they answered, but when it got to Mark, he said, "The Adam's apple," somehow not knowing that only men had them.

***

But if pressed to tell the story of when I first came out, I would place it when I was fourteen. That day, I came out with such confidence, because I didn't know I was coming out at all.

I grew up emulating my brother, a late arrival hippie who had long hair and wore faded jeans. So, to be like him, I refused to cut my hair after third grade. By high school, it was down to my belt. I'd lived in Washington, DC, but my family had moved to rural Maryland, and I hated it, felt like I didn't belong. Most of the kids in school were want-to-be

preppies, from straight-laced, Christian families who listened to the mindless pop music and wore feather cuts. A few boys had long hair, but they were mostly farmers' sons who'd never left the county, more inspired by Lynard Skynyrd than by radical hippies.

On the school bus, whenever I could, I sat quietly behind a boy named Brian Anders, just to look at the hairs of his neck, to hear his voice as he talked to his friends. At school, I'd wait to use the bathroom for when I thought there might be another boy there, knowing it was one of the few ways to see a penis. I even snuck looking at *Playgirl* magazines in the bookstore in town when I didn't think anyone I knew was around..

But those things, I never confessed to myself. It was as if I were watching them happen in a film, not making them happen. And if I did have a moment when I confronted myself about what I was doing, there was always a way I'd explain it to myself—everyone did these things, I was just curious about others' bodies.

One day, though, I happened to sit on a bench in the local mall, waiting for my mother and sister to finish shopping when a middle age man who shared the bench with me started talking. At one point, he asked me, "Are you straight?"

I didn't know what I know now—that is, what he meant by those words. I only knew the word *straight* to mean strait-laced, like most of the kids at my rural school. I said, without hesitating, without a speck of fear, "No, I'm not straight. Can't you tell?"

I don't remember his reaction. But I must have seemed so confident that he didn't confront me. Maybe he got up and left or changed the topic. Maybe we just stopped talking. Perhaps I even was a little upset that he had mistaken me for one of those people who think within the box, who walk the narrow line. I hadn't yet told myself that craving to see boys' bodies was a part of me, but I had somehow told this stranger.

But, just like that, I had come out, unknowingly. It took me years to realize what I had done, to recall that moment in the mall, which hadn't meant that much to me at the time, and to realize I had answered a question different than the one I thought I was answering.*

**Part of this essay appeared as "The Wave of the Moon" in* Apeiron Review. *That essay will appear in my forthcoming collection,* As Is: Essays on a Queer Life, Writing, and the Impermanent Nature of Things, *by C & R Press.*

"Four Cocks Ejaculating" by Johnny Townsend.

Broken Heels, Tarnished Tiaras

In my closet
Is “fill in the blank”
Next to my broken heels
And tarnished tiaras.

No matter how safe
The closet was
Feelings of
Inadequacy

Being less than
Too fat
Shy with men
Not a lot of experience.

Which in the grand
Scheme
Makes you feel
Less than human.

We all have closets
with strings
Spaghetti straps,
If you will

Something
happens.
In the closet,
If we don’t leave.

Your friend dies,
Kills himself.
Because this new
World is scary.

The world is
Burning down;
It feels easier
To hide.

But we leave the closets
Because we find our
Power, our perseverance
Our people, our place.

Closets are for
forgotten memories.
Outfits sentimental.
Clothes of daily living.

For some a safe
of jewels
Other a box of
porn or papers.

A closet is a room.
We breathe life into
And out
Of it.

Sweep it out
And try on
Something new
It might glisten …

Or be
A
Shiny
Pair.

—Auntie

Pigpen

Pigpen the Radioman's scruff-beard and greased hair
touched his ears, defied regulation,
no squared-away sailor but good with the crypto
so the Chief let him skate. Drydock in Long Beach,
he stunk up the backseat on the ride out to the rough bars—
always a wager, argument, fight—

locals shattering pool cues, metal-edged
tables, smudged windows, dark corners—a crevice
one night Pigpen and I side-stepped into together,
avoiding the brawl, big enough for just one.
I felt his balls on my leg, his dick on my fly,

his lips brushed my own—not a kiss.
One of us would have had to have opened a mouth,
tilted a head slightly. Neither did. Still stunk up the car
crammed in beside me all the way back to the base.
I asked him his real name. From then on
called him Mike and he called me Kid.

He got his orders, jumped ship to shore.
I stopped going to bars,

figured out something, started hitting the baths,
(I'd go there alone). Ran into him once
at the Top Deck, showered and shaved,
I nearly walked past him, a quizzical smirk,
wearing only a towel.
He said *hey Kid*. I said *hey Mike?*
He winked and walked on.

A kiss, after all.

He and I in a crevice,
avoiding the brawl.

—D. Scott Humphries

No Return to the Closet

By Tsuga

I didn't come out until I was sixty-two, although as I look back I see that I had inklings and stirrings that I was gay going back at least to my college days. I kept the closet door tightly closed for over forty years. I convinced myself I was straight, married a wonderful woman, and raised two boys who became fine young men.

I spent my formative years as a child and teen in a small college town in central West Virginia in the 1960s. In those years, homosexuality was still considered a mental illness and gay sex acts were illegal. While I'm sure there were gay men in town, including among family friends and college faculty, there were no openly gay role models. I felt it was just assumed that everyone was straight and that's the way I should be.

As a college student in Rochester, New York I cracked the closet door just a tiny bit when a friend invited me to join him at a gay bar, where I danced with other young men and got pleasantly fondled. But I panicked at the idea of doing anything sexual with a man I considered hot that I'd met over the summer. He was a seminary student across town who invited me to a party and then to spend the night in his room. Even though I loved being naked, I couldn't bring myself to sleep naked with him. I wanted it, but I couldn't bring myself to accept even the possibility of sexual contact with another man. The closet door had a powerful spring holding it closed.

In grad school at Kent State in Ohio I checked out the gay books section of the library when I first visited the campus. But I couldn't bring myself to even visit the gay student organization, which flew a prominent banner from the window of their office. I got a girlfriend, but secretly coveted her openly gay friends. I kept the closet door tightly closed, still convincing myself I was straight.

"No Return to the Closet" by Tsuga / Mark Turner. The photograph (a digital composite) is a self-portrait that represents the struggle to remain out of the closet. It was exhibited at the Seattle Erotic Art Festival in 2018.

My first full-time job was in Lincoln, Nebraska. Initially, I cracked the closet door a bit more, but the power of that spring was still strong. I cruised the capitol and went home with a few boys. I hung out outside the gay bar (it was the disco era and I hated disco music) and went to a few after-parties. I had a couple of openly gay co-workers and made friends with another gay man with whom I was sexual. Then AIDS came on the scene and suddenly carefree "I can't get him pregnant" sex was dangerous and life-threatening. I lost friends to the disease. I retreated deep into the closet when I married my wife in 1981 and stayed there for the next thirty-five years.

The closet was safe and secure. Keeping my "gay side" hidden let me live a happy, well-adjusted life. I served as a Boy Scout leader for many years, during the time when gays weren't allowed to be either Scouts or adult leaders. I like to think I had a positive influence on many boys as they developed into young men, helping them learn skills to be strong outdoorsmen and good citizens. I couldn't have done that if I'd been out as a gay man. The closet let me teach and share my love for the outdoors.

But there were cracks in the door and I'd occasionally have a dalliance with a man, usually when I was out of town on business. It was a guilty pleasure and a deeply held secret.

Eventually, I came to realize that I couldn't keep the door closed any longer. It took a year or so to finally throw the door wide open and come out as gay. I was fortunate that when my wife and I divorced, it was amicable and we're still friends. My sons and their families accepted dad's new reality and my grandkids don't know me as anything other than married to another man. Most of the time I feel no need to hide my identity as a gay man. Any time a straight man would refer to his wife, I openly refer to my husband. I'm fortunate not to have had any negative reactions, but Washington is a liberal and accepting state.

However, there are still times when I keep the fact that I'm gay a secret. Some of my best customers are right-wing politically and religious conservatives. Their money spends just as well as a gay couple's money, so I don't talk about my husband with these folks. It's just easier that way, avoiding confrontation. Does this mean I go back and forth, in and out of the closet? Not really. I've tried to avoid fights and selectively hiding one aspect of my identity when I don't see any benefit to exposing my queerness is just a way to lower my stress level.

I feel a bit of shame for not becoming an "out, loud, and in your face" gay man when I pushed the closet door wide open nine years ago. I'd hoped to find a flamboyant queen to push my boundaries. Instead, I fell in love with a quiet introvert. We married in the midst of the COVID pandemic and live a quiet life on five acres at the edge of town. There's no return to the closet for either of us, but neither do we feel inspired to shout "we're gay" from the rooftop. We're comfortable that way.

Artichoke

Opening the spiked gate
you peel off the armor
metaphor by metaphor

from the sleeping pangolin
to the tender anemone
to the closed rose

to the faded star
and the soft heart
waiting .

—Brent Calderwood

At Home in the Closet

by Eli Andrew Ramer

I like to joke that I'm the only person I know who literally had to come out of the closet. In 1956, when I was five, we moved from a tiny apartment in the city to a large house in the suburbs, where I shared a room with my little brother. A year later I got to move down the hall to a bedroom of my own. It was small but had a walk-in closet almost half the size of the room. When we moved in Daddy put in four rods for hangers, two in front and two in the back, one set high up and one set closer to the floor, where he and Mommy kept all their old clothes. When I moved into that room they rearranged their clothing to make room for mine on the lower rod in front, compressing all of their clothes on the three other rods. Without telling them, I pushed aside the clothing on the back lower rod and snuck in a small lamp on an extension cord, so that I could sit in the back of my closet and read. I was a painfully shy sissy boy who was endless teased by the boys in our neighborhood and at school, and that closet became my haven, my refuge, my sacred space—although I didn't know those words yet, or have that concept.

Dad left home when I was eight, taking our hi-fi—no one said stereo yet—tool box, and all of his new but none of his old clothing, so my hiding place remained intact. Soon after that my rich Uncle Bob gave us a gift, a new invention—a small portable television set, which none of us had ever seen before, and which my single working mom could never have afforded. Feeling generous, knowing that I'd come home from school each day, as I had very few friends, and go into the den and watch old movies on our big old TV in its wooden case—Mom gave the portable television to me, and I put it in the back of the closet! Heaven. Endless hours watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers movies, Hercules and Samson movies, in black-and white, which was all that there was then. No color yet.

As I entered puberty I began to be fascinated by other boys, and by the pictures of sexy men in the sports magazines that my brother got, and in the sports section in the newspaper, a section that I never otherwise read. I would cut those pictures out of my brother's old magazines and out of the paper, and hide them in a small wooden box that originally had carving knives in it. I stuck it in the back of my closet, behind the TV and a big pile of books.

It was there, in the back of that closet, that I began to play with my hard penis, and it was

"My Walk-in Altar" by Eli Andrew Ramer.

there one afternoon, to my initial horror, that my penis for the very first time shot out a wad of some thick liquid. I knew nothing about what had happened, wondered if it was a strange kind of blood, as I'd heard about red and white blood cells, but scary as it was—I felt wonderful doing it, looking at my sexy pictures, so there I sat, in the back of the closet, every afternoon when I got home from school, playing with myself, spurting more and more, into dirty pairs of underpants, looking at those pictures and fantasizing about sexy boys and men.

One day in seventh grade a teacher used a word that I had never heard before—"homosexual." I went home, took out a dictionary, read the beginning of the definition—"The unnatural attraction of… but read no more, closed the big fat book and put it back on the shelf. Unnatural. Oh. That was what was wrong with me. Unnatural. A word that sent me even more deeply back into my closet, literal and metaphoric.

That closet was my haven, my safe space, my hideout, my salvation, my private psychiatric ward. And when, a few years later, my mother could no longer afford for us to live in our big old house, we moved to a small apartment in what was called "the wrong side of town." Once again I had to share a bedroom with my brother, but that closet stayed with me, in junior high—no one said "middle school" yet—all the way through high school and into college, where I came out to myself in my junior year, came out to others in my senior year, and have been out ever since.

In 2016 I had to move out of the apartment in San Francisco that I'd been living in for fourteen years, and I chose the one I live in now, across the bay in Oakland, because of its great big walk-in closet. I call it my "walk-in altar." There's clothing there, and copies of all my own books, and I've covered its shelves with pictures of my ancestors, friends, and the dear ones in my life who've died. It's sacred space, connective shrine, my holy closet.

In The Closet

by J.N. exe

From our earliest memories, we fear the dark; what we cannot see is what we cannot defend ourselves from. What cannot see us, cannot attack us. We are never truly weaned from what we cannot see and the fear of being seen. We never learn how to handle what we cannot perceive or how we're perceived—we dress it up in so many ways so we can feel that we are in control. This is a foundational experience everyone has shared and we've all been lied to about.

The obscurity of darkness is not so powerful, and cloaking oneself does not strengthen you. We have been told that by hiding and by embracing the very thing we feared can save us. Unfortunately, that is only a band-aid for the problem. To center oneself is to find the light you need to draw yourself out of the closet, or from underneath the blanket that got us there; Being able to look forwards and backwards, orienting ourselves towards what we want and away from what we don't. The isolation of the darkness does not always quiet your mind, but often amplifies the doubt and fear within. You might never learn how to handle, process, interact (in a healthy way) with anything because the isolation gives you a false idea that there is nothing else out there that can help. This pins you to play a game of dichotomies of yes/no or right/wrong, causing anyone to feel like there is no answer at all rather than no answer they can think about at the moment.

The closet is not somewhere you should stay, the closet is one of the pit stops you can make so you can see the light. This vantage point allows you to see the light, in a hallway or living room, and move toward that. There is no shame in needing to retreat. These other rooms are the things in your life that affirm you that your existence matters whether that be friends, peers, communities.

In fact, the truest way to not fear the dark is to accept that what we perceive, and try to control how others perceive us, is how we protect ourselves (but also might project onto others). The closet swallows you and your fears whole, but step into the hallway light and choose how you want to see and be seen. We cannot hide in the darkness, but we can play with shadow and light.

My Coming Out Story

by Justin Whitney

In the early 90s (otherwise known as the late 1900s), I had the great privilege of working with Rob Eichberg, the co-founder of National Coming Out Day. He was running a self-empowerment workshop known as The Experience. Looking back, self-development workshops were sort of a fad of that era, and this was similar to several others. Uniquely, however, this one catered exclusively to the LGBTQIA+ community. For me, it was absolutely transformative. I began to see myself differently, to understand the power I possessed, and most importantly, to know I could love myself, even when I felt no one else did. The work Eichberg did changed countless lives, including mine.

One lasting impact was in my personal confidence and conviction around my orientation. By fluke of timing, my workshop ended shortly before National Coming Out Day, which he had cofounded with Jean O'Leary in 1988. While I had technically been out since the late 80s, I still had a sort of personal Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. This was the 90s, in Texas. Change was coming fast, but it was still dangerous, even in urban areas like the one I lived in.

But thanks to Rob, I began to see my orientation less as an embarassing secret and more as a core part of my identity, a vital part, one that helped make me who I was. I began to understand that living publicly, making SURE others knew who I was, would have a ripple effect that went far beyond me. Rob knew that every person who came out affected perception of our community as a whole. Bigots could no longer hide in their ignorance, insisting they didn't know anyone gay, "othering" those who were falsely portrayed by fearmongering conservatives. My family, friends, and co-workers knew me as a good person, kind and gentle. But they didn't all know this core part of my being. Out of fear, I was depriving myself, and them, of a fully authentic and honest relationship. Even worse, I was allowing their ignorance to go unchallenged.

Thanks to Rob Eichberg and National Coming Out Day, that changed. On October 11 of that year, he organized a Coming Out event at the local MCC, attended by hundreds and hundreds of LGBTQIA+ folk and their allies. A long line queued up before the microphone at the front and center of the stage. My heart pounding, I screwed up my courage and jumped up from my seat. I'd never spoken into a microphone before, never addressed a crowd of people. I was sick to my stomach. But when my turn came up, I strode confidently to the mic, and in a shaky but strong voice announced, "My name is Justin Whitney and I AM GAY!!"

The applause felt rapturous. My body moved on to make way for the next person, but my spirit lingered in that moment for years to come. It wasn't my first coming out, but it was by far the loudest, and the first of many public declarations to come.

I'll forever be grateful to Rob Eichberg, who passed in 1995, only a couple of years after I met him. His vision, which he stated often, was that "by the year 2000 it will be absolutely okay to be lesbian and gay -- and the diversity will be valued and celebrated." His vision may not have manifested in the time and to the degree he imagined, but life in 2025 is so vastly different than in 1995 that I am consistently astonished. We're seeing people come out in high school, get married in college, bring same sex spouses to family gatherings and work events without a second thought. We're seeing gender identities so fluid that I regularly have to google new terms for them. And most important, it is now the presumptive understanding that being lesbian or gay is absolutely okay, and that bigots are now the oft-closeted minority.

My coming out was a single drop in a tidal wave of change. And though our community is under attack in a way that feels much like our struggles thirty years ago, the general public knows who we are now. And we're never going back to the way things were. Rob really did help change the world. And I'll be forever grateful I got to witness it from the front row.

Celebrating RFD's 50th Anniversary at Saints and Sinners 2025

by Franklin Abbott, Jason Ezell, Steven Riel

Notes from Franklin Abbott:

The conference is held in the historic Hotel Monteleone in the French Quarter of New Orleans. I attended with two old Georgia friends by way of Montgomery, Alabama where we went to the Legacy Museum, The National Monument for Peace and Freedom and the Rosa Parks Library. All required witnessing. Things were very different when we got to New Orleans the next evening. Impeccable, old world service at the hotel and in the Carousel Bar, a local crooner, James Martin, was setting the place on fire. My friend Roger was enamored so I suggested a photograph. The next night we were directed to the third oldest restaurant in NO, Cafe Sbisa. The food was delicious and the painting over the bar was salacious. Our waitress couldn't explain it but agreed when I said, it was not a traditional religious painting.

Conferences always present the dilemma of competing workshops but this was a can't go wrong situation. Wherever I landed I was rewarded. I attended Donna Minkowitcz's workshop on memoir and Trebor Healey's workshop on "the voice" writers choose in their narrations. The overlapping Tennessee Williams Festival gave me the opportunity to hear a panel on Banned Books led by NPR's Maureen Corrigan. I knew her voice but I had never seen her. She was joined by Micheal Cunningham, Joan Larkin and Margot Douaihy. I wish the panel could have gone on for a day. I participated in a reading by writers who were attending. There were seven of us. I was asked to begin and I realized how hard it is for me to read from my new collection, *My Ordinary Life*, from RFD Press. The author I resonated the most with, and I am not a fan of horror, was Ery Shin. She read a passage from her novel, *Spring on the Peninsula*, that was so horrifying it set my teeth on edge. And yet she read it matter of fact because it was. Shit happens. Bad shit.

The highlight of the conference was our panel on the 50th Anniversary of *RFD*. Both Steven and I had been poetry editors and wanted to talk about the poets we had met and published. Steven read the work of some of the poets he published and it was sublime. Jason Ezell, whose history of Southern Faeries and our relationship to *RFD*, will be part of his new book, *For a Spell—Sissie Collectivism and Radical Witchery in the Southeast*, represented the history that makes *RFD*, one of only two LGBTQ publications that is still in print for fifty years (the other is the esteemed lesbian journal *Sinister Wisdom*), talked about *RFD's* tenure at Short Mountain Sanctuary. Thugsy da Clown was in our audience and told a story about how he had been shown *RFD* headquarters in a shack at the Short Mountain Sanctuary. I remarked that current co-editor Bambi Gauthier said that when the archive was unpacked in Vermont, well, there were spiders . . .

You can prepare, prepare, prepare for a workshop and advertise, advertise, advertise. You may still have empty seats. And we did. No big names here, no big controversy. But for the dozen plus of us in the room, presenters and attendees, we were bearing witness. *RFD* is fifty years old. It began half a century ago when most of its readers had not yet been born and if we close our eyes and click our ruby slippers together, it will live fifty more and a hundred more as we cast our fey queer shadow/rainbow into the future. Faerie kisses Forever. And when you can come down the Mississippi to the Port of New Orleans. Wander with the intoxicated and the sanctified. Have a seat at the Carousel Bar at the Hotel Monteleone and relax, sin, and sin a little more.

My revel pals Bill and Roger and I forged on to the beach. Gulf Shores, Alabama is where I saw the ocean for the first time. It is 95% developed but there are still a few houses on stilts just like in olden days. Our hotel was next door to the big state park and we walked the beach, passed fellow beachcombers, and picked up shells. We had driven through driving rain to get there, ate the best the sea had to offer, and when we headed home our hearts were full of music, enchantment, atmosphere and the pulse of life living it up.

Notes from Jason Ezell:

I am lucky enough to have recently called New Orleans home, having lived there for six years. In

2023, I struggled with moving away, but a friend and native New Orleanian told me that "You never really leave New Orleans. You carry her with you, and she will always call you back." That this call came in the form of the *RFD* panel at the 2025 Saints and Sinners conference—a platform shared with poetry editors Franklin Abbott and Steven Riel—struck a sweetly inspired note. I can imagine no better way to engage this old, queer city.

I feel the three of us raised good magic in the Hotel Monteleone conference room. I confess that such craft was on my mind. I was stoked to also present on a panel about queer witchcraft that was moderated by Trebor Healey, with Jacob Budenz, Sven Davisson, and Jewelle Gomez. The air in the room crackled and mirrored as the five of us spun how witchiness and queerness always trouble the edges. For me, as a historian and librarian, it was important to emphasize how my own queer witchcraft practice—as a soon-to-be initiate of the Unnamed Path—centers on an intimate collaboration with queer ancestors. I referred to this working as a kind of NecRomanticism.

On the *RFD* panel, Steven and Franklin so very openly and gracefully raised the spirits of past reader-writers of the journal which was early dedicated to "country faggots everywhere". They carried the voices of poets past into the hearts of those in the present room. They recalled the efforts of their editorial hands and how they (differently) situated themselves to the community that the journal embodied and circulated. I placed the origins of *RFD* within the historical context of shifting obscenity laws, countercultural sexual politics, rural isolation, and a very material print culture. This last seemed particularly important. In the very first issue of *RFD* (1974), the Iowa editors wrote, "R.F.D. is a reader-participatory venture. You write, sing, dance and *are* R.F.D." I pointed out that, in many ways, the publication had served as a surrogate body for its reader-writers, a body they sent through the mail and placed in each other's hands. At the conference, when Franklin and Steven filled the room with the voices of *RFD* poets—a number which included themselves—they gave the collective body which was assembled in 1974 an enduring presence in 2025. Given the rise of new New Right violence, such endurance is vital.

They certainly took me back. And I was so touched—as always—to see Thugsy's face in the audience. As I recalled my first visit to Short Mountain, during the last millennium's turn, he brightly offered, "That's right! You must've been in my place!" And I had indeed stayed in the Temple that he had raised at the sanctuary. I had also seen his mischief-filled clown face in a painting on the wall at New Orleans' Broad Theater, as I left an arty matinee. And his had been the face that called out to me when I marched my first Chewbacchus parade through the Marigny, as I moved alongside a dear New York friend who had outfitted us with otherworldly costumes. As I sat on our spring 2025 panel, I more fully realized how *RFD* has materialized a network, a palpable memory, for me, since I was first introduced to it roughly a quarter century ago.

I wrote my first book (*For a Spell*, a history) in New Orleans. In it, I describe how the Louisiana Sissies in Struggle (LaSIS) had—with Short Mountain's Milo Pine—edited *RFD* in the Crescent City multiple times in the late 1970s. My friend and former LaSIS member Dimid Hayes had taken me to see the multiple little Creole cottages that LaSIS had rented in those years. It staggered me to realize that I had found some queer belonging in the very same city, while reviewing those old *RFD* issues. Around the Saints and Sinners conference, I saw local friends at old haunts. Aubrey and Kai at the Quarter's Envie and at the Treme's Fatma's. Adam and Greg at the Phoenix and Le CaBARet. We spun old yarns into new stories. Each couple took me to an incredible Thai place that I hadn't known before: Budsi's. As always, the eating and drinking are good in New Orleans.

Looking back, I sometimes worry whether I have told *RFD* collectivists' stories well. Saints and Sinners taught me to dwell on something else: the gift of realizing that we never tell queer collectivist stories alone. It's just not possible. It's a telling that is always shared.

Notes from Steven Riel:

I thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the history of *RFD* from Franklin and Jason through my participation on this panel. My involvement in the community surrounding this journal was more removed than Franklin's because I lived up in New England and did not attend fairy gatherings.

Since I served as Poetry Editor from 1987 to 1995, I wanted to highlight the quality of some of the poetry published in *RFD*. I read what I con-

sidered to be five of the most outstanding poems that I selected during my tenure. They were by Walta Borawski, Ron Schreiber, Jeff Walt, Michael Hathaway, and Winthrop Smith. I reminded those present of the strong impact that the AIDS pandemic inevitably had on the content of many poems submitted at that time. I also pointed out that poets who later became prominent, such as CA Conrad, had some of their earliest publications in *RFD.* In closing, I read one of my own poems that appeared in the journal. It is titled "The Gay And" and offers a campy take on the ampersand.

In addition to presenting on this panel, I helped to shape and then moderated another titled "Poets Respond during Troubled Times." KB Brookins, Margot Douaihy, and Sean Patrick Mulroy painted a vivid picture of how they were naming, coping with, and passionately resisting the policies and rhetoric of the second Trump presidency. I walked away from the session profoundly inspired to challenge myself to overcome any hesitancy or inertia that prevented me from addressing in my own creative work the many forms of injustice, oppression, and even violence whipped up by the MAGA movement.

The Closet

by Benjamin Kahle

For those of us in the LGBTQ community, the interior walls of the closet meant a lifetime of suppression. And the denial of one's truth. Tucked away in an uncomfortable darkness, arranged and sorted by color and texture. A place where larger-than-life fantasies could remain hidden. But for those who had little or no choice but to conform, this closet became a personal prison. Inside, a varied collection of protective garments, glittered and tame, and outerwear of various thicknesses and sizes. Some of these closets offered solace from the light. While others remain hidden among the backroom shadows. Buried under pounds of guilt and degradation. The threat of public exposure demanded that their contents remain hidden and forgotten forever. Unattainable dreams packed and subjugated like sardines, refusing to shine. More often, neglected and forgotten as if they never existed in the first place.

It is here that I am saddened the most. Decades of personal secrets left to perish and rot. Secrets hidden and cast away. Forever shadowed by malevolent eyes that systematically denied someone their right to exist. Generations of men and women forced from the spotlight, never to be seen or heard from again. And those who did venture out, were forced to wear a carnival mask. And don dark, drab colors that were not bold enough to buck society norms. Or to challenge the status quo. Those who did were left to lurk on the fringes of non-conformity like a virulent drug used to eradicate from their mind all sense of self to the glory of their confessors.

It's true, society was not kind, even at the height of the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s. The newly vetted smiles hid a double-edged sword, displaying one face in the light and another to be discovered. But for now, the closet doors remained open, and the subsequent years were the years of jubilation. The party would go on, challenging the status quo, and the closet became a thematic symbol for a new generation. Pride and acceptance was the new calling card of the day. It was almost as if a cathartic wave had shifted the landscape, and all our pent-up emotion could be released. The tide was changing. We were free. Now, it was up to us to carry it forward.

For some, that sense of determination led them to explore their innate feminine side and for others to reclaim their masculinity, their self-worth, and secure a place in history. There was no more time for excuses. No self-repression. No more being molded in the image of our oppressors. We were equal under the law and in a world based on one overriding principle.

For many of us in our senior years, the closet is a symbol of claustrophobia and suffocation. There are no windows in a closet. You can't lock someone up and tell them to forget who they are. The air is stifling inside. Sooner or later, a lifeforce will burst forth. And no one wants to live in a world where they can't breathe.

A Sudden Coming Out

Then there was the day
I suddenly kissed Sean Dillon's stomach
his lean Boy Scout stomach
and he laughed all over me
like popcorn
being thrown at a movie screen.
His freckles laughed.
His teeth were the color of teeth
sunk deep inside a honey hive.

—Leo Racicot

"Sean" by Leo Racicot.

Untitled by Artboydancing.

Working with Edmund White: Vignettes from Memory

by Leo Racicot

The very first dirty word I ever heard out of Edmund White's mouth wasn't what I expected. I was expecting the OG of Gay Literature to blurt out cocksucking, finger fucking, felching, something like the no-holds-barred vocabulary of his books. But no. The first dirty word Edmund White uttered when I met him was "pussy". We were sitting in choice orchestra seats at a production of *Uncle Vanya* at New York's City Center when the curtain rose and leading lady, Cate Blanchett, appeared. She was this close to us. Ed leaned over and twittered, "I can see her pussy" which we actually could through her diaphanous underpants. We both howled like school girls, and I could tell Blanchett heard us and sent a scathing look our way. That made me like Ed immediately. That was also the time he told me the story of "awful Lillian Hellman" who, whenever she went to the theater and had to leave her seat, would deliberately step hard on the feet of the people in her row. "A meaner woman you never met." Ed loved telling this story and repeated it many times at his apartment cocktail gatherings.

I came to know Edmund White, first, of course, through his work; de rigueur reading for gay guys coming of age in the '60s and '70s. Then, through social media exchanges, after which he invited me to West 22nd Street to act as a fill-in caregiver/typist/companion. Ed was recovering from a series of small strokes and didn't want to be left alone. His boyfriend (later husband), Michael Carroll, was leaving for Chapel Hill to help his boyfriend, Phil, move from there up to Boston where he'd accepted a teaching post at B.C. In Michael's absence, I was hired to give Ed a hand with his new book manuscript, *Inside a Pearl: My Paris Years*. Through our correspondence, he learned that I was a French major and devoted Francophile. He and Michael also got a kick out of the fact that I'd been friends with writer, M.F.K. Fisher, and had had dealings with Lowell native, actress Bette Davis.

So, it began…

Ed's daily regimen was this: up early, breakfast, usually consisting of cereal, strong coffee, a sweet roll perhaps while checking his email, catching up on correspondence. This was followed by work, dictating what he'd written the night before. He wrote longhand in black-covered monographs, black ink. Right away, he asked me how a sentence or two could be made better. But this was the renowned Edmund White and I said, "I wouldn't presume" to which he purred, "Please do…" Ed had a habit of quite suddenly running the palm of his hand over his face, from forehead to chin, in one, rapid movement. Before I realized this was a nervous tic, I took it to mean he was exasperated with my work performance. Work would wrap up around noon for lunch, usually

Top: one of Edmund's and Marilyn's dumpling evenings. From left: Mr. Chu, Marilyn Schaefer, her sister Sue, Stanley Redfern. Edmund White kneels in front. Bottom: Out for dinner. Edmund White and myself, NYC, October, 2012. Photo by Joyce Carol Oates.

restaurant sushi or sandwich (always Ed's treat). This would be followed "for fun" with Ed giving a lecture at one or another prestigious venue around town then home to ready for his guests. Ed loved to entertain; he'd arrange the most delightful gatherings in the manner of what his lifelong friend, artist Marilyn Schaefer, called "dumpling evenings", intimate get-togethers and dinners (never more than six guests). Ed had an almost psychic knack for bringing people together, who'd get along with whom. A string of literary lights passed through that lovely dining/living room area: John Rechy, Benjamin Taylor, Joyce Carol Oates, Barry McCrea, Gabe Hudson, J.D. McClatchy, Chip Kidd, Christopher Bram, Alfred Corn. Ed knew everybody. He kept a heady schedule (I had a hard time keeping up). There was an Auntie Mame aspect to Ed's character; in the middle of work or business, he'd be seized with an idea, "Let's go to the theater!" "Let's go try this new restaurant!" He'd grab his coat (he was fond of an old Miyake frock) and head us out the door. He loved squiring me and others around Manhattan and was, himself, a kid at Christmas over the latest Broadway play—he disdained musicals—or restaurant. In Ed's company, there was never a dull moment; after a performance of Balanchine's *Jewels* at Lincoln Center, we spied Peter Martins in the lobby and went over for a chat. During my work visits, we ran into Alan Cumming strolling The Garment District, Charles Blow in the Men's Room at Babbo, Thomas Mallon in City Hall Park. Mark Doty, Sarah Schulman and a burgeoning Ocean Vuong in The West Village's Phoenix Bar.

A memorable evening: we met and had dinner with Joyce Carol Oates and members of the Oxford University Press at an upscale Upper East Side Italian restaurant before continuing on to a reading at the nearby Barnes & Noble. I was so nervous, I downed not one but two double martinis and wound up schnockered, to Ed's delight. I was so blotto, I'm told in the back of the taxi cab taking us to the bookstore. I proposed marriage to Joyce Carol Oates, my ardor based on the fact that we both liked cats. Ed salved my embarrassment saying, "It's okay, Leo. Now you're part of Joyce's world view."

Ed was wildly, inordinately generous; he liked handing out wads of cash. One time, in payment for what didn't amount to more than a morning's work, he slipped $500.00 into my hand. If I was going for a walk, or heading to the store, it was common practice for him to ask, "Do you need any money?"

He was possessed of a voracious appetite, for people, for curiosity, for food, for sex. There's no describing what a brilliant, fertile mind Ed had, or what delightful company he could be. He was capable of expounding on Balzac and Proust one minute then suddenly being on the floor of his apartment collapsed in belly laughs over a joke about what a nightmare actresses who'd married multiple times (like Liz Taylor and Hedy Lamarr) must have been to live with. He got a charge out of seeing how a guy my age could be so gullible and once had me convinced that he'd composed the national anthem of Burma. When I was back home, he had the disarming habit of ringing me up, saying not "hello" but chiming excitedly, "Write this down!" and would dictate some morsel of memory, an anecdote he'd resurrected and wanted preserved. I can't tell you the number of times I'd come home to messages on my answering machine: "Hi, Leo. It's Ed. Hello? Hello? And then, wryly, "Oh, I suppose you're off chomping on your Sunday mutton chop or something." I have not one but two recordings of Ed warbling "There are fairies at the bottom of my garden". Ed and I loved Bea Lillie.

Ed would retire early to his bedroom but I don't think he ever slept; he'd be up all night writing, listening to the radio, reading. He read with an almost extraterrestrial speed, and one bedtime I remember he began Lanny Hammer's thousand page biography of James Merrill and by morning had finished it. Not all the time but most of the time, Ed played opera while he wrote; he said music facilitated his writing. Michael was the opposite, needing complete silence. When he wrote, he wore ear plugs. Both he and Ed were thoughtful hosts; remembering that Milos Forman's *Amadeus* was one of my favorites, Michael went out and rented it and they ran a private screening in Ed's bedroom. A very special Christmas Eve.

I've kept thousands of emails Ed sent me through the years, Treasures. Whenever I need a lift and a laugh, I pull one up and feel much better. Ed's company, whether in person or on the page, made of life something sparkling, something special. The thought that this reservoir of creativity has left us and will no longer be writing is appalling.

I sometimes wonder why Ed welcomed me, some jamoke from Lowell, into his circle of friends. He must have seen something of worth in me; he invited me back to work for him a few times. The last time I was there, it was a New Year's Eve. We were all gathered around the TV set, and Stephen Colbert and his guests were singing, "Where or When." "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when. But I know we'll meet again some sunny day." Some wistful sixth sense told me I'd never see Edmund White again, and I never did.

Remember

Some have doors: that lock with a key.
Some have doors that slide open.
Some have doors that are hidden.

Some are shallow, simple with a single rod.
Some are portals, complex with a back exit.
Some are sanctuaries, sacred, with a mat on the floor.

Some hold skeletons, monsters, and moments.
Some hold hats, jacket's, costumes, clothes, and objects.
Some hold security, protection and joy!

Remember.

—Miss Fire-Fly

In Memoriam, Lawrence Brose (1951-2025)

by Keith Gemerek/Fussy lo Mein

Photograph by the author.

"It is through art, and through art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence." —Oscar Wilde.

Filmmaker Lawrence Brose left us on Sunday, April 13, just days after his exhibition opened at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo. His final show, "CAGE: A Filmic Circus On Metaphors on Vision," was his masterpiece.

You may remember Lawrence best from his acclaimed film, *De Profundis*, a colorful and kaleidoscopic, hand-processed film, using Oscar Wilde's prison letter as a subtext. Essentially it is an exploration of self-liberation while under repression, a look at masculinity and sexuality, and a critique of the normalizing and homogenization of gay culture in the 1990's.

In 2009, the Department of Homeland Security targeted Lawrence with allegations designed to squash an unapologetic gay artist. ICE agents claimed he had downloaded child pornography on his home computer in a loft shared with visiting artists. An agent told him they were not exactly sure he was the culprit, but being a gay artist, they were pretty sure he was the one. Magistrate Judge Jeremiah J. McCarthy first ruled that there was no case and suggested dismissing the charges. But U.S. Attorney, William J. Hochul, Jr. (current New York Governor Kathy Hochul's husband) had other ideas. He assigned the case to William M. Skretny, a conservative Republican judge. At great expense, a computer forensic analyst determined that there were no such illicit images on his computer's drive. But the Feds had his computer, and they needed to save face. At the hearing they declared that unless he pled guilty to one obscene image, (a legal fiction that no one, not even the judge, was offered to view), they would come back with endless charges against him and use his *De Profundis* images in the charges. After five years of fighting back and amassing hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees, he had no choice but to accept that guilty plea and two years of supervised probation. At sentencing in 2014, Judge Skretny went off on a rant about needing to set an example due to the seriousness of the charges involving the possession of child pornography, even though there was no such evidence in this case. I have known Lawrence Brose intimately

since childhood and can testify that there was never any personal interest in children sexually, and it was never present in his artwork.

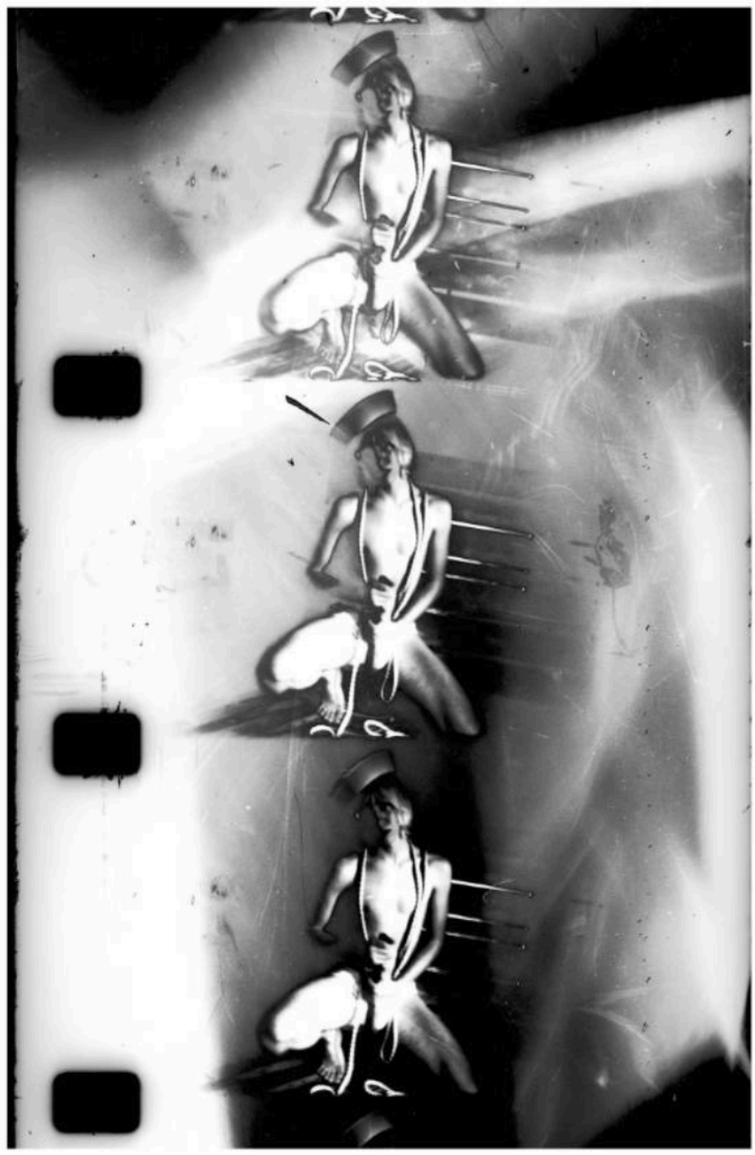
After sentencing, Lawrence was subjected to two years of horrific abuse from Kathleen Horvatits, a zealous and cruel Christian probation officer who treated Lawrence as a pedophile who had gotten away with murder. She subjected him to random early morning alcohol testing, several times after important moments like his birthday or holidays and then forced him into a half-way house with actual criminals who beat him up and stole his phone. Throughout this ordeal, she threatened to put him on the sex offender registry, which is a life sentence, but a judge put a stop to that. An added insult was that after stepping down from his job and surviving on unemployment benefits, Lawrence was forced to repay those benefits plus a fine because, after claiming innocence, he had been railroaded into accepting a guilty plea thereby disqualifying him for these past benefits. The larger picture is that the Patriot Act, enacted by President George W. Bush, was supported significantly by President Barack Obama, thus empowering the minds of the paranoid and homophobic with expanded powers of surveillance. The homeland needed to be defended even if there was no enemy to be found, so they invented one: the gay artist.

Lawrence's friends in the art world stood by him, knowing the charges were unjust, and rallied to support him. The National Center for Reason and Justice (NCRJ) advocated for Lawrence against the false accusations and facilitated fundraising to help pay the mountain of debt he incurred for his legal defense. Once released from probation, he was welcomed back to his job as director of CEPA Gallery, Buffalo's notable not-for-profit photography center. Putting this nightmare behind him, he returned to making art with his film work and supporting other artists at CEPA.

Lawrence always maintained his innocence and never gave in to vengeance. He faced it all with nobility and grace, but it proved too much for him. In April 2024, Lawrence was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer.

Studies have shown that stress is a contributing factor in developing pancreatic cancer. It is clear to me that the false charges and abuse in probation were the harshest events of stress in his life, leading to his diagnosis and the limited time left to complete his exhibition work.

An unfinished film, *Crossing the Line*, concerned a traditional naval ritual when a ship crosses the equator that involves sailors cross-dressing and "simulated" sex acts, is put in storage for now, waiting for someone to complete it. A dying wish.



Fragment of De Profundis.

Lawrence survived the odds of attending the opening of his final exhibition. He was triumphant. Surrounded by supporters and loved ones, he spoke so eloquently about the life-supporting power of making art.

Art saved him. The Feds killed him.

Gathering Announcements

December 29, 2025 – January 5, 2026

Terra Rosa – Genesis Gathering near Barcelona, Spain. Info: tinyurl.com/4af727k9

January 29, 2026 – February 8, 2026

Tropical Full Moon Gathering, Koh Yao Yai, Thailand. Info: asianfaeries.com

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The Saints & Sinners LGBTQ+ Literary Festival is a program of the Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival. Next year's festivals will be held March 26-29, 2026. Visit: www.sasfest.org for more information.

Saints & Sinners 2025-26 Short Fiction

One grand prize of $500 and two second place prizes of $100 will be awarded. In addition, finalists will be published in an anthology. There will also be a book release party and reading held during the 23rd annual Saints and Sinners LGBTQ+ Literary Festival in New Orleans in 2026. A list of the top finalists will be posted on our website and in our e-newsletter.

Saints & Sinners 2025-26 Poetry

One grand prize of $500 and two second place prizes of $100 will be awarded. In addition, finalists will be published in the Saints and Sinners Poetry Chapbook to be distributed at a special reading at the 2026 Festival. A list of the top ten finalists will be posted on our website and in our e-newsletter.

Help support Faerie Camp Destiny's next building project

The goal is to construct a 26 ft X 26 ft Wellness Center which will consist of a sauna, massage area, showers, toilets, changing room, and medical station. Master timber framer Ariel led a team of twenty faeries through Destiny's timber framing workshop. With Flash and Doozer leading the charge on the footers, posts and flooring frame we have completed the timber frame of Phase 1.

The proposed budget for materials for the first year is $22,000 and with a total cost expected to come in around $40,000 for Phase 1 & 2.

You can donate online via www.gofundme.com/f/destinys-wellness-center-bathhouse or you can send the donation directly by sending a check to FCD (with memo Wellness Center):

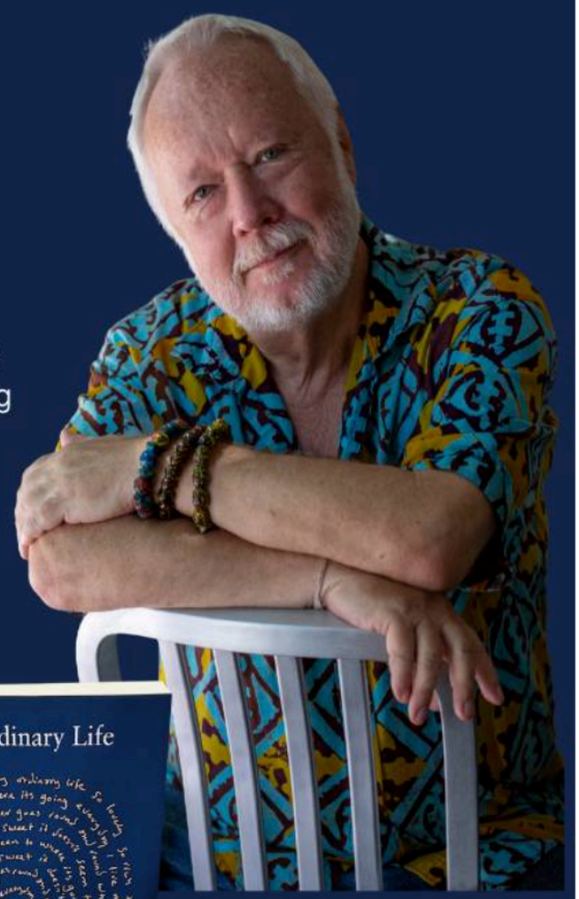
Faerie Camp Destiny
P.O. Box 517
Chester, VT 05143-0517

My Ordinary Life

By Franklin Abbott — Poetry / Memoir

My Ordinary Life is as therapeutic as it is poetic with an affirmation of trauma that begins to allow it to surface and be healed.

Interwoven are stories of friends who were lost, the pain and fear of isolation, the confusion of the world opening and closing again. Abbott interweaves his own aging, the deaths of both of his parents and the growing awareness and appreciation of the simple gifts of everyday life.



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Get your copy at your local bookstore or online!

Visit Franklin's website to learn more and purchase options.
https://tenminutemuse.wordpress.com/my-ordinary-life-book/

What People Are Saying

Franklin's writing is anything but ordinary... Franklin bridges the human experience across literal continents and shifting states of mind, centering how we embody memories, pain, grief, connections and joy. — Luis R. Alvarez-Hernandez

At the peak of the AIDS epidemic, Franklin Abbott created many compelling, memorable poems about love and desire in a time of catastrophe—some of which have lingered close to my heart through the years. — Isaias Fanlo

What a gift Franklin Abbott gives us with this new collection!... In these perilous times, we need these new verses more than ever. — Cary Alan Johnson

By personal experience, training, and as a practicing therapist for many decades... this life, even in its simplest daily minutiae, has been anything but ordinary. — Don Perryman

poems and prayerfulness, sorta like long sentences of swear words you only say in secret, holy places; then, forgiveness singing hallelujah in a chorus with all of your lightning bug friends, flying through this beautiful storm … finally, just that.

seeing
where love happens that lasts; for forever

more poem shapes and word knots from the Multicolored Universe
by Todd Brady de Garcia, author of
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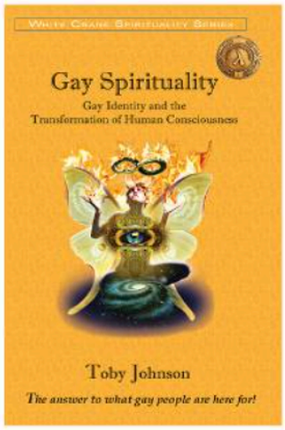
Gay Spirituality
Gay Identity and the
Transformation of Human Consciousness
Toby Johnson
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Issue 205 / Spring 2026

HEARTBREAK

Submission Deadline: February 15, 2026
www.rfdmag.org/upload

Heartbreak can be one of the most debilitating human experiences. It requires risk and vulnerability to open ourselves to love, especially for the first time, leaving our hearts exposed to being broken. We can become addicted to another's touch and the safety those moments provide. The pain is felt physically—depression, exhaustion, confusion, and fear—the same grief cycle of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

How have you transformed your pain into healing? Has heartbreak opened you to deeper self-knowledge or left a lasting scar? While loneliness persists, growth needs sunshine. How has your community witnessed your heartbreak and held you gently? Did you keep your heart open for reunion or protect yourself by closing off? What gave you strength and guided you to trust that "everything would be okay"? Did you clarify your boundaries or blur them as you healed? Have you been a heartbreaker as well as a heartbroken one?

The world can be tough for the tenderhearted. Our families shape our earliest understanding of love and hurt, and sometimes chosen families wound too. What has sanctuary taught you about healing your heart? Loss of friendship mirrors romantic heartbreak but can lead to new bonds. How has community both broken and healed your heart? Do you feel heartbreak for a suffering world?

Healing can come in solitude, with moments of deep truth and patience for ourselves and others. When did you know you had healed? What silver linings did you find, and what did you release? How have you marked the milestones of growth—through ritual, music, or art? As heartbreak fades, have you opened to love again, or is your heart still fragile? Ultimately, who are you now, having taken the risk of being human?

Drawing by Donald Patten